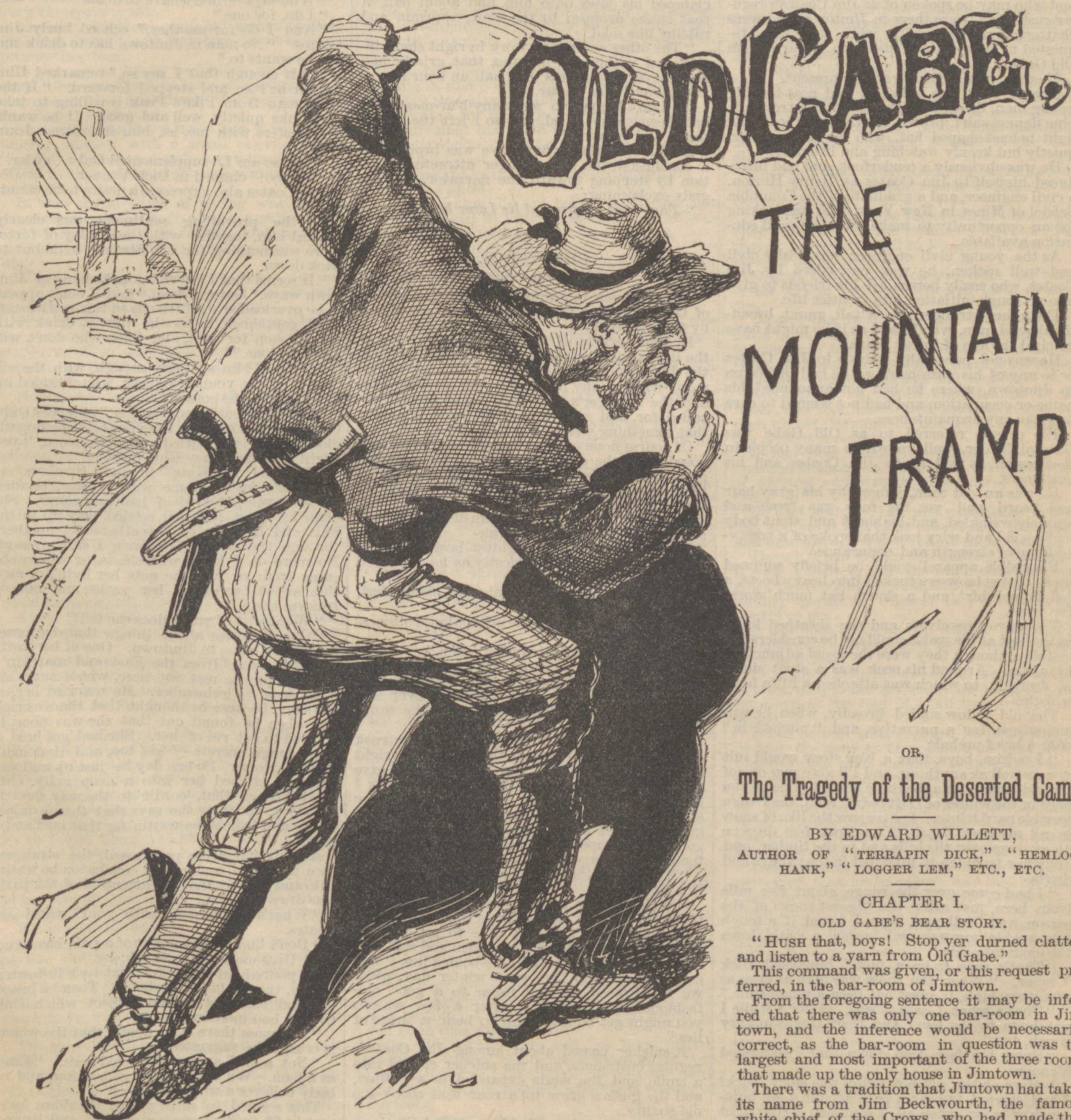


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OLD GABE.

OR,
The Tragedy of the Deserted Camp.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,
AUTHOR OF "TERRAPIN DICK," "HEMLOCK
HANK," "LOGGER LEM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

OLD GABE'S BEAR STORY.

"HUSH that, boys! Stop yer durned clatter, and listen to a yarn from Old Gabe."

This command was given, or this request preferred, in the bar-room of Jimtown.

From the foregoing sentence it may be inferred that there was only one bar-room in Jimtown, and the inference would be necessarily correct, as the bar-room in question was the largest and most important of the three rooms that made up the only house in Jimtown.

There was a tradition that Jimtown had taken its name from Jim Beckwourth, the famous white chief of the Crows, who had made that locality his temporary abiding-place before set-

ting in the beautiful valley where he found such an attractive retreat.

But nobody could point to any memorial of Jim Beckwourth by which the truth of the story could be proved.

When the building of the railroad made that region accessible and brought it into notice, some speculative sharps seized upon the site of Jintown as a necessary center of trade and population, and proceeded to establish a city there.

They took up the land, built the one house that has been mentioned, laid out a handsome city, on paper, with streets and avenues and parks and public squares, and named it Emporium.

But trade and population gave the place the go-by, and nobody came to settle or to buy the lots, and the name of Emporium was forgotten, and Jintown promised to remain Jintown to the end of the chapter.

There was good reason why it should hold the title, as a burly Pennsylvanian named Jim Coates had taken possession of Jintown after the speculative craze was over—that is to say, of the one house, above mentioned, and his name fitted in there quite naturally.

Jim Coates had started Jintown on the road to success as a tavern, and had made it pay fairly.

There was little accommodation for man or beast, except in the way of whisky; but there were men in the region—and women, too, for that matter—who were apt to consider whisky as the most important of earthly requirements.

Thus it was that Jintown thrived, and Jim Coates was seldom lonesome.

Several of the men who have been referred to, and who may be spoken of as Jim Coates's regular customers, were there in Jintown, and were chattering rather noisily, when they were requested to be quiet and listen to a yarn from Old Gabe.

There were also two strangers present.

One of them was a bright and neat-looking young man, dressed in gray corduroy trousers, blue flannel shirt, brown canvas short coat, and light helmet-shaped hat, who sat in a corner, quietly but keenly watching and listening.

He was obviously a tenderfoot, and had introduced himself to Jim Coates as Henry Hinton, a civil engineer, and a graduate of the Columbia School of Mines in New York, who was looking for an opportunity to make his talents and education available.

As the young civil engineer was really civil and well spoken, he was patronized by Jim Coates, who easily persuaded his friends to give him no rough initiation into frontier life.

The other stranger was a tall, gaunt, broad-shouldered man, who looked as if he might have reached the age of thirty years.

He was not personally known to Jim Coates or to any of his customers, as he had just come to Jintown, where he had not announced his name or occupation, and had not seemed to care to make any acquaintances.

The person referred to as Old Gabe was Gabriel Cryder, well known to many people in that region, as well as to Jim Coates and his customers.

He was an old man, judged by his gray hair and beard, and yet his face was fresh and scarcely wrinkled, and his short and stout body had a solid and wiry look that spoke of a reserved force of strength and endurance.

His visible apparel could be briefly summed up as coarse trousers tucked into heavy boots, a red flannel shirt, and a slouch hat much worse for wear.

The pair of revolvers and the sheathed knife in the belt at his waist could not be considered as clothing, though they were the usual adjuncts of his attire. Around his neck was a stout sinew of deerskin, to which was attached a little horn whistle.

The old fellow smiled broadly, when he was announced for a narrative, and "pitched in" with a brief prelude.

"I reckon, boys, that a b'ar story would suit you as well as anything, and I'll give you one of my old-timers. Maybe there warn't none of you here in the winter of 'Fifty-six? Well, that was a terrible hard winter. I never saw the like of snow in all my born days. 'Twas four feet deep on an average over the hills and in the timber, and anywhere from ten to fifty feet in the valleys and drifts."

"I had come over the range, about five mile from here, just after the biggest snow of the season, and I tell you, boys, I found it a tough job workin' my way and beatin' a path down the mountain-side."

"That's sure to be a fact," remarked Dick Venner. "When the snow was nigh as deep as you were high, it must ha' been a tough time."

"That's what I said it was. After a while I got down to the level, and there it was mighty tough, too."

"Snow ten feet deep down thar," suggested Venner.

"More or less. Who's tellin' this story, Dick? I had started to beat a path around a big hummock of snow, when all of a sudden it rose right up before me, as if 'twas alive."

"And so 'twas alive."

"It was an all-fired big grizzly b'ar that rose up thar—nothin' less than a thousand-pounder, and he made for me."

"A grizzly out in winter?" ejaculated the tall stranger.

"Sounds kinder queer, don't it. But there was somethin' queerer than that a-comin'. I happened to look toward the hill, and what should I see, comin' down the slope like a black streak of lightnin', but a rattler of the biggest kind—six foot long, if 'twas an inch."

"Ugh!" grunted the tall stranger, as he turned away in disgust.

"Cold times for the rattler," suggested Dick Venner.

"Yaas, sorter cold. He'd made a mistake, I reckon. So he had to work hard to keep warm, and he did work hard, as he was comin' lickety split. There was a bit of a crust on the snow, you see, and that gave him a fair chance! I had cocked my rifle, and was doubtin' whether I ought to pour the dose into the grizzly or the rattler, when the cussed crittur threw himself into a coil."

"How could a grizzly throw himself into a coil?" demanded Venner.

"'Twarn't the grizzly. 'Twas the rattler. Any fool might know that. The grizzly had riz up on his hind feet, and was comin' for me with his mouth wide open and his tongue hangin' out, when the rattler made his spring, and into that grizzly's mouth he went like a flash."

Gabe Cryder waited for this statement to settle, and then, perceiving that his audience was too much overcome to contradict it, he resumed his story.

"Reckon he must ha' been huntin' a warm place. Anyhow, he found one. The grizzly clamped his jaws onto him, and about half of that snake dropped to the snow, squirmin' and rattlin' like mad."

"The other end got its work in right sharp inside, and within ten minutes that grizzly had keeled over, and in less than half an hour he was as dead as Julius Caesar."

"I didn't happen to want any b'ar-meat that had been snake killed, and so I left the critter there, and went on."

As this remarkable narrative was brought to a conclusion, the tall stranger attracted attention by stepping toward the narrator, and angrily exclaiming:

"That's the all-firedest lie I ever heard."

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGER SNUBBED.

ALL the men in Jintown, with the exception of Old Gabe and the stranger, were astonished by this outbreak.

In that section of the country the giving of the lie was usually followed by a fight—in fact, the blow was always expected to succeed the word without any interval worth speaking of—and the stranger's utterance was so utterly uncalled for, and so objectionable in its manner, that something serious was looked for.

Of course none of Jim Coates's customers supposed that the old man intended his extravagant tale to be considered as mathematical truth, and it was quite out of place to question his veracity.

But Gabe Cryder did not seem disposed to look at the matter in a serious light.

He did not make the slightest hostile demonstration, but smiled quizzically as he answered mildly:

"Perhaps you make a mistake about that, stranger."

"Nary mistake. It's the infernalesst, rottenest lie I ever heard."

"Maybe you hain't traveled much."

"Traveled? If I hain't traveled, there's no use in gettin' over ground. I'm Bob Strahan, from Pike's Peak, and I've been all over this country from end to end, and you're the worst liar I ever struck."

"This must be the first time you ever struck Jintown. There's men in this town now, right before your eyes, who can beat me and give me points, or think they can, and sometimes I think it's nip and tuck between Dick Venner and me. After you've been here a while, stranger, you won't kick against such a mild, easy-goin', soft-tempered lie as the one I passed on the boys a bit ago."

"You admit that it was a lie, then?" observed Bob Strahan.

"Well, it may go for one, though I don't brag on it. It's only a little spring lamb of a lie—a weaklin', sca'cely able to git up and trot. But the weather's so warm and soft that it ain't fit for strong and able-bodied lies. You ought to drop in here some winter day, when we feel braced up, and listen to a good old-fashioned lyin' match. After a few seasons you might get educated up to bein' a judge of lies."

A snicker passed about among Jim Coates's regular customers, and the snicker spread into a smile, and the smile expanded to a guffaw, and the guffaw grew to a roar that shook the old shanty.

The stranger who called himself Bob Strahan, perceiving that the laugh was against him,

joined in it, as it was obviously useless under the circumstances to persevere in picking a quarrel.

"Seems to me that I was a little too fresh about chipping in," said he. "Gentlemen all, will you join me in a drink?"

"We will, indeed," answered the old man, "and there's not a sign of a lie about that."

All the present population of Jintown, with one exception, ranged themselves in front of the bar, the stranger at the head of the line, and Jim Coates began to set out the glasses.

The exception was the young civil engineer, who neither moved or looked up.

Strahan noticed this defection, and frowned as he made a step toward him.

"Come up and drink, young man. It's my treat."

"No, thank you," replied Hinton. "I don't drink."

"He don't drink!" exclaimed Strahan, in a tone of wonderment, and the faces of the others, though they said nothing, expressed great surprise.

"I didn't ask you to come up, young tenderfoot," said the bully, in a threatening manner. "I ordered you to come."

"All the same, I don't drink," replied Hinton. "No use sayin' that. You've got to drink."

The young man showed unexpected pluck and spirit.

"That's the old gag," he said. "It may work down about Pike's Peak; but it won't do for Jintown."

This statement touched the local feeling of Jintown, and may have been intended to do so.

"That's a fact," added Old Gabe. "He don't have to drink."

"Who says he don't have to drink?"

"I do, for one."

"And I do for another," echoed burly Jim Coates. "No man in Jintown has to drink unless he wants to."

"It is enough that I say so," remarked Hinton, as he rose and stepped forward. "If the gentleman from Pike's Peak is willing to take his drinks quietly, well and good. If he wants to interfere with me, let him interfere. I am ready."

"And so am I," supplemented Gabe Cryder.

"Me too!" chimed in Dick Venner.

Jim Coates also expressed a desire to be counted in.

As the prevailing sentiment was clearly against him, together with the display of force, there was nothing for Bob Strahan to do but to back down.

"It seems that I haven't got the hang of Jintown ways," he remarked, "and I don't appear to be overloaded with friends in this settlement. Well, gentlemen, those who want to drink with me will step forward, and those who don't will leave it alone."

All joined him willingly enough, with the exception of the young engineer, who subsided into his seat in the corner.

"Talkin' about liars, stranger," observed Gabe Cryder, doubtless with the view of dispelling the gloom that had settled upon Jintown, "you ought to strike Crazy Kate once."

"Who is Crazy Kate?" inquired Strahan.

"That's just a name we give her, because we've never got hold of her real name. She came here last fall, and settled 'way up in the hills, and how she ever weathered it up there through the winter is 'more'n I can guess at. No more do I know who she is, or where she came from, or how she gets her livin', or anythin' about her except her yarns, and nobody believes them."

"What sort of yarns does she tell?"

"Queer stories about things that happened before she came to Jintown. One of her yarns is about comin' from the East and marryin' a young chap she met out here, whose name she don't seem to remember. He married her, as she says, because he thought that she was rich, and when he found out that she was poor, he wanted to get rid of her. She had got hold of some tough secrets of his, too, and that made matters worse. So one day he just up and shot her, and pitched her into a deep gully. She lived through that, 'cordin' to the way she tells the story, and now she says that there's a lake of fire and brimstone waitin' for that husband of hers."

As this narrative progressed, the stranger's face darkened, and at its conclusion he was so pale and ghastly that the attention of the party was drawn to him.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Jim Coates.

"Don't know. Some sort of a pain has struck me. Give me some more whisky."

He poured out a glassful, and took it down at a gulp, though his hand shook. Then he braced up, and recurred to the subject which Gabe Cryder had introduced.

"I suppose there is no doubt that the woman is crazy?" he suggested.

"Not a bit," answered the old man. "Crazy as a loon. We all pity the poor thing, and nobody believes a word she says."

This seemed to satisfy Bob Strahan; but a moody fit took possession of him, and he soon rose and left the house, with scant courtesy to

the population of Jintown, and mounted his horse and rode away.

Gradually the Jintowners dispersed, and Gabe Cryder was the last to go.

Before leaving the house he turned to Henry Hinton, and gave him a friendly grasp of the hand.

"I like your pluck, young man," said he; "but I am afraid that the stranger might have given you a rough deal if we hadn't chipped in."

"I think I was safe, Mr. Cryder. I don't mean to allow myself to be imposed on, and I was prepared for anything that man might do. Besides, I felt sure that Jintown would see fair play."

"Good boy! I hope I will have a chance to see more of you."

CHAPTER III.

ALMOST A GHOST.

HENRY HINTON had business in the neighborhood of Jintown, or thought he had, or wished to find business there.

As has been previously stated, he desired to turn his talents and education to account in the mining regions, and Jintown was to be the base of his first operations.

He had a good knowledge of geology, which he had studied with especial reference to the precious metals, and he proposed to apply it by examining the rocks and the formation in the vicinity of Jintown, with a view to the discovery of valuable deposits.

If there were any such deposits, it was reasonable to suppose that the Jintowners would have already found them; but they might not have done so, as they did not appear to be a very enterprising set.

Anyhow, the young engineer meant to geologize that district, and therefore he set out on a prospecting tour.

It was not to be an ambitious or extensive expedition, as he had no idea of getting out of easy reach of a settlement—if Jintown might be called a settlement.

So he took neither a horse nor a mule, contenting himself with a small canvas bag of "grub," a hammer, a pick, and a tin pan, in addition to his equipment of arms, and trudged off to the hills.

It was the loveliest of spring weather, the air warm and moist from the reeking earth, and ve dure everywhere budding and sprouting, as if glad of the chance to come out and enjoy life.

When he got up into the pine region, the balsamic odors of the trees refreshed and strengthened him with every breath he drew.

Thus the labor of prospecting was a pleasure to him, rather than a task, and he found the employment so delightful that he considered himself fortunate in having come into that country.

He found no vein of metal, nor any indication of a vein, but was able to get a good general idea of the region through which he passed, and was pleased that his geological knowledge proved so available when he came to put it in practice.

His dinner was a picnic of one, which was thoroughly enjoyed by the single participant.

He built a little fire in a lovely valley between two high hills, at which he toasted bits of salt pork, catching the drippings on slices of Jintown bread, and on this frugal fare he feasted gloriously.

No elaborate dinner in an expensive hotel could have pleased him better.

After dinner he continued his prospecting, confining himself to the valley in which he had built his fire.

The quality of the rock that formed the sides of the valley, with the dip and general tendency of the formation, induced him to believe that gold ought to be found somewhere in that locality.

But he made no valuable discovery, though he knocked off bits of rock in many places, and examined the fractured parts carefully with the aid of his pocket microscope.

Yet, the more he saw and the more closely he examined the formation of those hills, the stronger became his conviction that something ought to be found there, and he continued his search until the lateness of the hour warned him to return to Jintown.

He then discovered, considerably to his surprise, though not to his dismay, that it was easier to decide upon returning than to return.

He had lost his way!

Strange as it seemed to him, and unexpected as was the fact, he was obliged to confess to himself that he did not know what direction to take to reach Jintown.

He had failed to notice his bearings when he came down into the valley, and had therefore lost his reckoning.

The sun was out of sight, and he had no compass.

It was true that there was a brook in the valley, which at that season was quite a stream, and water necessarily runs downward, and Jintown was somewhere on a plain below.

But there was no telling whether the brook ran to the north or the west or the south, or

whether it would lead him toward his destination or away from it.

He determined to follow the stream, as there was nothing else that seemed to give him any sort of a chance.

It astonished him to see how rapidly night came on as he wandered down the valley.

It was near twilight when he started, and soon it was dusk, and the dusk was accompanied by a haze that covered the hills like fog.

This haze, doubtless caused by the exhalations of the earth, was just thick enough to make vision dim and indistinct outside of a short reach.

But it was easy enough for the young man to follow the stream, and he knew that the moon would soon rise, and then the mist would make a fairy scene of the mountain.

Moreover, it would not worry him if he should be obliged to pass the night outside of the shelter of a roof, and he felt no uneasiness on any score.

The moon was decidedly behind her time, and then he comprehended the fact that she was hid by the hills behind him, and therefore he must be facing the west as he went down the valley.

Thus he knew at last that he was headed in the right direction.

Suddenly he was startled by catching sight of a strange object a short distance below him, near the foot of the hill at his left.

At the first glimpse it looked to him as if the vapor had gathered more thickly at that point than elsewhere, forming something that might be mistaken for a statue.

But the object began to move, and statues do not travel of their own accord.

He began to run, with the view of overtaking and investigating it; but it sped down the valley so swiftly that he was just able to keep it in sight.

Then the moon soared up above the hills that had hid it, and poured into the valley a flood of radiance that glorified the mist.

It lighted up the object that Henry Hinton was pursuing, and gave it the appearance, indistinctly defined, of a female figure, that seemed to float just above the ground, and to be borne onward as noiselessly as an apparition.

Was it a ghost?

Henry Hinton did not believe in ghosts; but he was obliged to admit just then that he was oppressed by a feeling of the supernatural.

What could it be but a ghost?

The same pluck and determination that had led him to face the bully in Jintown impelled him to pursue the phantom and solve the mystery.

He put more speed into his running, and was rapidly overtaking the object of his pursuit, when it suddenly disappeared.

But the disappearance was accompanied by a faint cry.

Then he knew that the ghost was a woman, and that the woman had fallen.

Perhaps she had been injured by the fall, and he hastened to assist her, as it was his duty to do.

Just as he reached her she rose from the other side of the log over which she had stumbled, and confronted him with a leveled revolver.

It needed but a glance to tell him that she was not only young and pretty, but was dressed neatly and almost elegantly.

This was a surprise to him, but hardly more surprising than the fact that such a person should be met in such a locality.

He smiled when he saw the revolver, and lowered his hands, with the palms toward her, as if to argue that he was not dangerous.

"Suppose we don't fight," he pleasantly remarked. "I am not inclined to fight, and am sure that I don't want to hurt anybody."

Evidently his appearance and manner assured her of his good intentions, as she replaced her pistol in the sheath from which she had drawn it.

"I would not have followed you," he continued, "if I had known that you were a young lady. But the mist deceived me, and curiosity compelled me to find out what it was that was flying before me. When you fell, I was afraid that you were hurt, and I ran to offer to help you."

"Thank you, sir," she said, not coldly, but with a little hauteur, as if she was not anxious to cultivate the acquaintance of a stranger. "I thank you; but I am not hurt, and I need no assistance. I allowed myself to wander too far from home, and night came on me unawares, and I must make up for lost time by hurrying back."

"If your route lies down the valley, as mine does," suggested the young man, "perhaps you will permit me to accompany you as far as you go in that direction?"

She did permit him, and, as they walked down the valley, her hauteur disappeared, and her tongue was loosed, and she chatted with him in a friendly manner about the beauty of the scene.

The moonlight on the mist did indeed give the situation a peculiarly romantic charm, which was heightened by the presence of the

girl, and to Henry Hinton it was as good as a page out of a fairy book.

But she brought it to an end rather abruptly by halting and bidding him good-evening at a break in the hills which led toward the south, saying that her route lay in that direction.

Just at that moment the young engineer was extremely anxious to see more of her, or, at least, to make sure of meeting her again.

"Had I not better accompany you as far as you go?" he asked.

"It is not at all necessary, sir. I know the way well, and am quite able to take care of myself."

"Do you often walk out in this direction? The valley is so lovely, and I am studying the rocks about here. Perhaps I might meet you."

"You are not likely to see me again, sir. My father will be displeased when I tell him that I have met somebody. Good-night."

"Will you not tell me your name?"

"I cannot. Good-night."

She soon disappeared in the pass, and Henry Hinton wandered homeward, convinced that there was no place like that valley for prospecting, and taking its bearings carefully, so that he would be sure to find it again.

CHAPTER IV.

AN ATTACK IN THE REAR.

HENRY HINTON dreamed that night of the fair unknown whom he had met by moonlight, and in the morning she occupied his waking thoughts to such an extent that there was no room for anything else except prospecting.

As the prospecting business had become inevitably connected with her, he deserved no credit for thinking of that.

Again he started out, equipped as on the previous day, to examine the rocks in the valley he had discovered, and possibly to prospect for something else.

He could not expect to find such an outcrop as he had struck there by moonlight, as she had positively assured him that he was not likely to see her there any more; but it was possible that he might meet her, and of that possibility he wove some delightful dreams as he went along.

He found the valley easily enough, and ascended it to a higher point than he had reached the previous day.

The formation of the rocks caused him to pay close attention to the business of prospecting, though he did not fail to keep an eye out for a possible bit of muslin.

Nothing of that kind came within the range of his vision; but he discovered indications of ore.

Though the indications were slight, and gave but a faint show of "color," they were sufficient to convince him that there was gold in the rocks, and that in the valley there must be possibilities of placer diggings and pockets.

Accordingly he turned his attention to the brook, and soon discovered that its course had been turned, leaving the old bed to the right of the present stream.

It had been turned by human agency—no question of that—and doubtless for the purpose of digging and washing the gravel in the old bed.

He had scarcely had any experience in mining, and yet it was clear to him that the gravel had been disturbed to a considerable extent.

Though it had been replaced after washing, as if with a view to hide the work that had been done, there remained sufficient evidence of rude mining operations, whether they had been successful or not.

It was noon when he had settled this point to his entire satisfaction, and he proceeded to prepare his dinner.

He made a little fire as before, toasted his bits of pork, caught the drippings on his bread, and sat down at the foot of a tall tree to enjoy the repast.

While he was thus engaged he could not see or hear the motions of a man who approached him from the rear, stepping as quietly as a cat and as stealthily as a red-skin.

The man continued to advance noiselessly until he reached the tree, when he suddenly pounced upon the young prospector, throwing him face downward on the ground, and holding him there until he succeeded in tying his hands.

When Hinton was permitted to partly rise, he perceived that his assailant was Bob Strahan, the bully whom he had met once previously at Jintown.

Strahan's face was darkened, rather than lighted, by a sneer of gratified malice, as he looked down at his victim.

"What do you mean by this?" demanded Hinton.

"What do I mean?" answered Strahan with a chuckle. "Well, I don't mind telling you. I am just going to have a little fun, and you are the party I mean to operate on. You are the high-headed young tenderfoot who refused to drink with me at Jintown, and turned the galoos there against me, and made them set on me. I am going to settle with you for that bit of impudence, and make you sorry for it."

"What do you propose to do?"

"I propose to give you a proper good welting

—to tan your hide—to put my mark on your back in a way that will make you remember me.”

As an earnest of his intention the bully pounced upon his victim again, raised him up, and placed him against the tree.

There he succeeded, in spite of Hinton's struggles, in first loosing his hands, and then getting them around the trunk and tying them there, so that the young man could not escape.

“You have given me some trouble, you young sucker,” he said, as he paused for breath after finishing his task, “and you will have to pay for that, too.”

He walked aside, cut two stout switches, and returned to his victim.

“Now I am going to score you,” he observed, again expressing his satisfaction with a chuckle. “It's a pity about that coat of yours, as I shall have to spoil it in getting at your back; but you've no business to wear a coat.”

Hinton, who could turn his head sufficiently to catch a view of his tormentor, ground his teeth in impotent anger.

“Let me tell you one thing,” said the young man. “If you really mean to do such a job as that, I advise you to do it thoroughly. Don't let me live through it, or I will kill you, if you are anywhere on this earth.”

“That's a loud crow for a young rooster. Reckon you will crow another tune before I am through with you.”

The brute trimmed the switches carefully, and advanced toward his victim; but his mean and cruel purpose met an unexpected interruption.

A man issued from a covert near by, and ran toward the tree. He was an old man, short and stout, but was not at all winded by his exertion.

Henry Hinton, who got a glimpse of him as he ran up, recognized him as Old Gabe Cryder.

“Don't be in a hurry,” called out the old chap. “I've got a word to say about that.”

Bob Strahan turned upon him savagely.

“Keep your distance, you old tramp!” ordered the brute. “You've no call to interfere, and you might get hurt.”

“Reckon not, and nobody else is goin' to get hurt, unless it's you.”

The old man carried a rifle; but he dropped it on the ground, and drew no other weapon.

It appeared that he had more than one way of fighting.

Suddenly Gabe lowered his head, and ran at the bully, butting him in the stomach.

Strahan had drawn a pistol, but had not succeeded in cocking it when this human catapult struck him.

The blow knocked the breath out of him, and sent him backward to the ground, where he lay doubled up.

Gabe Cryder stepped to the prisoner, and cut the rope that bound him to the tree.

“Get your rifle,” he ordered, “and cover that cuss. If he squirms, plug him!”

Hinton gladly obeyed, while the old man got his own rifle, which he promptly placed where it might do the most good.

Thus it was that when Bob Strahan picked himself up, he could not see his way clear to get rid of the wrath that flooded him up to the first level.

“Take it is easy as you can, you durned wolf,” growled Old Gabe. “You see that we've got the drop on you. You've played a mean and dirty game, but we're goin' to let you off. Take your tools, now, and crawl out, and don't you dare to look back once, or a pillar of salt won't save you.”

Bob Strahan got his rifle, and sneaked off down the valley. He did not once offer to look back, and it was well for him that he did not, as the two rifles covered him as long as he was in sight.

“So that scamp sneaked up on you while you were eatin' your dinner,” observed the old mountaineer. “He seems to be the meanest and most malicious human crittur I've struck in a long time. What are you doin' up here, young man, anyhow?”

“Prospecting a little,” answered Hinton.

“Queer place for prospectin', I should say.”

“I don't mind telling you, Mr. Cryder, that I have found color here. There is gold in these rocks.”

“Like enough, but hard to get at, and not near enough of it to pay for the trouble.”

“I see that somebody has taken the trouble to turn the course of the brook, and to wash the gravel in the old bed.”

“I have noticed that; but it looks as if somebody had been having his trouble for his pains. I don't believe there is enough color about here, young man, to pay for any sort of prospectin'.”

“Don't be too sure of that, my venerable friend. My prospecting paid me very well yesterday.”

“How so?”

“In the evening, when I had lost my way in the valley, I struck what looked like a ghost; but it proved to be a girl—a bright and pretty girl, and modest and intelligent, too. I would never have thought of meeting such a specimen of human nature here.”

The young engineer told the story of his adventure of the previous evening; but noticed

that Gabe did not seem to be surprised by it or specially interested in it.

“It seems to me,” observed Hinton, “that as you are what might be called an old resident here, you ought to be able to tell me who and what that young lady is, or to put me on her trail somehow.”

“Perhaps I might,” answered the old man, looking keenly at his companion, “if I could be sure that you are no sort of a wolf in sheep's clothing, and I believe that I am pretty sure of that. I am free to say that I like you, young man. You seem to me to be white and straight. Suppose you go with me to my cabin, where we can talk things over, and I may be able to put you on more than one trail.”

Henry Hinton gladly accepted this invitation, and the two tramped down the valley.

CHAPTER V.

THE OLD TRAMP AT HOME.

GABE left the valley at the break in the hills in which the girl had disappeared the night before, and this was regarded by his young friend as a very favorable symptom.

As they descended the valley Hinton had occasion to wonder at the old man's conversation, as it revealed an extent of observation and a degree of intelligence, combined with flashes of wit and a flow of humor, of which he would not have been suspected.

But what chiefly interested the engineer was the belief that he was going to meet, or to be put in the way of meeting, the lovely phantom that had entranced his vision and occupied his thoughts.

This belief was confirmed by the direction that Gabe Cryder took on leaving the valley.

His spirits rose as he trudged up the rising ground among the rocks and trees, and when he came in sight of the cabin he felt an excitement which he would not have been willing to admit.

It was not a valley in which the cabin was situated, but a depression in the mountain-side that left a level plateau of small extent, but fertile and well wooded, facing toward the southwest, and commanding a splendid view in that direction.

A portion of this mountain plain had been cleared of timber and set apart for cultivation, the ground being already broken for spring planting.

Near the rugged hill at the north end was Gabe Cryder's cabin, small and rude enough, and with but one thing to distinguish it from the ordinary run of such habitations.

That one thing was another building, at the rear of the cabin, and set close against it, but so different from it that it could not be considered as forming a part of that structure.

It was, indeed, though similar in shape to the cabin, and not much larger, of quite another order of architecture.

While the latter was built of rough logs, from which not even the bark had been removed, the adjunct was constructed of hewn timber, solidly set and closely joined at the corners, so as to give its exterior a respectable and comfortable appearance.

As it presented itself to Henry Hinton when he approached it with his companion, there were no doors or windows visible, and he could not help wondering why an erection of that style and character should be there.

The old man at once ushered his guest into the cabin, the door of which was not locked or fastened in any way, and there a great disappointment awaited Hinton.

His phantom was not there.

The cabin was comfortable and clean enough, with a good bunk in one corner, with a few books on a shelf, and the necessary odds and ends of furniture and cooking utensils; but there was nothing anywhere about it to indicate womanly care or occupation.

Gabe Cryder noticed the cloud of disappointment that had settled on his companion's countenance, and hastened to clear it up.

“I know what is the matter with you,” said he. “You have shown plainly enough as we came along what you expected to find here, and I must explain that matter to you. The girl you met last night was my daughter—my baby—the only one left to me now. You shall see her before long, as I believe that you are to be trusted; but I want to have a talk with you first.”

After that promise Hinton was willing to talk, or listen, or do anything that might be required of him.

The old settler of mountain ranch raised to his lips the whistle which was pendent from the thong around his neck and gave a sharp, short blast. In a few seconds there came into the cabin, stooping as he entered the door, a person whose appearance startled the guest.

He was of immense size, and his long and straight black hair spoke of Indian blood. There was, also, more than a suspicion of red-skin color in his face, though his features were so distorted and ugly that nothing could be guessed at from them.

He seemed to combine in his great and ungainly person all the deformities that nature could invent to disfigure one of her creatures.

When he stood erect, his height and size made

him a formidable being; when he was in a sitting or squatting posture, he seemed to be a shapeless mass of very ugly humanity.

His attire was incongruous, and calculated to increase his ugliness.

The lower part of his body was incased in deerskin leggings, after the Indian fashion, and the upper part was arrayed in a rude coat of brown-blanket cloth, with a shirt of the same material beneath it; but his long and brawny arms, apparently loaded with muscle, were quite bare.

As he stood in the doorway he twisted his face into a hideous contortion, which Hinton suspected of being intended for a smile.

It might have been that, as the old man answered the courtesy with a grin, and proceeded to communicate with the creature in a sort of pantomime which both appeared to understand perfectly.

Henry Hinton could make nothing of it except that it seemed to contain a reference to him.

He naturally wondered what was the matter with the creature, that rendered such a mode of communication necessary.

Was he deaf and dumb?

He could hardly be deaf, or he would not have heard and answered the whistle; but he might be dumb.

Gabe Cryder's orders were soon given, and the deformed giant stooped again as he went out, followed by Hinton's curious gaze.

“You are wondering at Golo, now,” remarked the old man. “I reckon he's not the only thing you will find to wonder at here. He is a half-breed—a mixture of black blood with red. He was kicked out of the tribe he belonged to—the only wonder is that he wasn't strangled when he was a pappoose. The red-skins despised him so that they drove him away, and I picked him up and took care of him. He is as faithful as he is ugly, and is now very useful to me. Though he is completely dumb, his hearing is something wonderful. I was telling him to let Mollie know that you and I will soon go in to see her, and ordering him to get something for us to eat.”

This explanation was eminently satisfactory to the young man, especially as he then heard for the first time the name of the fair phantom with whom he was soon to be made properly acquainted.

Gabe Cryder brought out some liquor and glasses, and invited his young friend to join him in “wetting his whistle.”

“You really don't drink, then?” he remarked when Hinton declined the invitation. “I thought that perhaps you had made a point of refusing down at Jimtown, to worry that galoot from Pike's Peak. Well, you may be better off by leaving it alone, and I won't press it on you. If you can have patience to listen to me, I want to tell you a little yarn.”

The young man was more than patient, and Gabe spoke to him confidentially.

“I reckon I must have seemed to you, at least in Jimtown,” went on the old man, “to be a happy-go-lucky kind of an old cuss, who would rather lie than tell the truth, and sooner drink than work. But I have had my share of troubles in this life, and I have them yet.”

“I've hunted and trapped and guided and mined in these parts for many years. I was in with the red-skins when they killed game and each other among these hills and over these plains, and I've near about seen the last of them.”

“When they had ceased to be dangerous, and I had picked up a pretty wife in a town to the eastward, I brought her out here, and we lived as cosey and comfortable as two people could, so far away from anywhere.”

“About those times I was a good deal sought after as a guide, by rich men who came on to hunt, and by speculators and emigrants and such, and it paid me right well.”

“One of the hunting parties I had was made up of three Englishmen, two New Yorkers, and one St. Louis man, and a jolly set they were, though the Britishers were a bit cranky, as they mostly are, seems to me.”

“I got on with them right well, and they got into the way of callin' me His Royal Toughness, because nothin' in the way of weather or accidents ever seemed to phaze me.”

“One day they sent me off to the fort to ask for letters, and when I got back to the camp they were gone.”

“I came up here to my cabin, and my wife had gone, too!”

“I knew that she had gone with them, because she left a paper for me, sayin' that she had found somebody she liked better than me, and that I would never see her again.”

“I ain't sure that I rightly knew the name of one of them, except the St. Louis man, as they gave each other all sorts of nick-names.”

“I put out after them; but they had a big start, and I thought better of it, and came back.”

“If my wife didn't care for me any more, I didn't want her.”

“The only thing that worried me was that she had carried off our baby boy.”

“I got over that, Injun fashion, and brought another wife out here, and we had two more

children—a boy who is about twenty-two now and Mollie, who is the baby.

"Then my second wife died, and young Gabe got restless, and last year he started out to hunt his fortune, tellin' me that he'd come back when he'd made a strike.

"I've heard from him now and then, in the mines below here; but he hadn't made a fortune at last reports.

"So here I am, with one wife and one boy lost, and another wife dead, and another boy wandered off, and only Mollie and me left."

"It is a hard case," observed Hinton, "but the younger boy will come out right, I hope."

"I hope so. In the mean time I must look sharp after Mollie. I've got somethin' more to tell you, young man; but I need cheerin' up. Let's go in and see Mollie."

CHAPTER VI.

SPLENDOR IN LOGS.

THE manner of making the proposed visit was somewhat peculiar.

Gabe Cryder raised a blanket that hung against the wall at the rear of the cabin, and knocked on the logs.

There was a noise on the other side, as if bolts were being withdrawn, and then a section of the wall in the shape of a door moved backward.

Hinton could not help admiring the ingenuity of this contrivance and the neatness with which the work was done.

The rough logs had been sawed so neatly that only close inspection would disclose the cut, and the pieces had been bolted together, and chinked and daubed, so that they could not be distinguished from the rest of the wall.

The section did not swing on hinges after the manner of a door, but was pulled away on a rolling platform, and was rolled back into its place when the two had passed through the opening.

What Henry Hinton saw as he entered astonished him so that he could not speak.

It seemed as if he had been suddenly and magically brought into a boudoir in some elegant mansion in a city.

The floor was covered with a soft and heavy velvet carpet of a beautiful pattern, and the walls were elegantly hung, besides being adorned with really fine engravings.

In one corner was a marvel of a bedstead with lace curtains, and on the other side a handsome dressing-case.

At that end was a window opening, cut out of the hewn logs, and operated by machinery similar to that which moved the door.

At the other end was a fireplace which was not attractive to look at, but was shut off from the rest of the apartment by a screen.

Handsome tables and luxurious chairs made up the remainder of the leading articles of furniture, and evidences of feminine tastes and habits were everywhere visible.

But by far the most attractive object in the room, and one that instantly arrested attention, was the fair occupant, who was seated in a comfortable rocking-chair, neatly dressed, if not elegantly, resting her dainty slippered feet on a cushion.

She rose as her father and his friend entered the room, her pretty face bright with smiles, and presenting a notable contrast to the deformed giant, whose ugly countenance was more than usually distorted by his attempts to look pleasant as he closed the door.

"As you have already met my daughter, Mr. Hinton," said Old Gabe with a grin, "you don't need an introduction."

Hinton's blushes were fully as visible as hers, and just then he could scarcely do anything more than subside into a chair and endeavor to collect his scattered senses.

The actual presence of the fair phantom, and the strangeness of the situation and surroundings, overwhelmed him to such an extent that he hardly knew whether he was sitting or standing, and was almost incapable of doing or saying anything.

It was she who pulled him through, and brought him out of his queer predicament.

In a natural and easy manner she referred to the adventure of the previous evening, speaking of it lightly, but so as to make it plain that it had been a pleasure to her.

"It is so seldom," she said, "that I have the least thing to amuse or excite me, and I knew that I had gone beyond bounds, and when I caught sight of a man in the valley it scared me. When he pursued me I was thoroughly frightened, and ran my best until I fell. I am quite sure that I would have shot you where you stood, if you had not proved to be so gentle and well-spoken."

"I am very glad," observed the young man, "that you did not look upon me as being any worse than I was."

"I was not afraid of you then, as it occurred to me that you must be the same young man my father had spoken of as being in Jintown. I told him about you when I got home, and described you to him, and he said that you were the same, and was not a bit cross."

The young man had got his wits together by this time, and he talked freely and well, with the

sensation of having dropped into an unexpected Paradise.

After a while Golo placed on a table a really good meal, and all but he sat down together and enjoyed the repast.

While they were eating, the ugly giant busied himself in hovering about the stranger, examining him from all directions and from all points of view.

"Golo is taking you in," said the old man, in explanation of these actions. "When he is through he will know all about you, and will decide whether you are to be trusted."

"Why do you call him Golo?" inquired Hinton. "It is a queer name."

"His Indian name is too long and hard for common use, and Golo was what Mollie called him when she was a baby, and so it grew to be his name."

Apparently Golo was satisfied with his inspection, as he squatted in a corner, distorting his face into what was understood to be his smile.

"Now we will go into my house and smoke," said the old man, when they had finished the meal.

Hinton reluctantly dragged himself away from his paradise, and Golo closed the door that shut him out from it.

As he entered the old man's rude cabin it seemed like a descent from heaven to earth.

"What do you think of that nest?" asked Gabe Cryder, when they had lighted their pipes.

"It is a fine cage for a fine bird," answered the young man thoughtfully. "But it is a cage, all the same."

"Yes, I know that, and I feel it, and so does Mollie, though she don't like to tell me so. But what can I do?"

"Let the bird out."

"Turn her loose to fly about here? That would never do. As well turn a fawn loose among wolves."

"I don't mean that, Mr. Cryder. Suppose you take her where it will be safe to let her out."

"That means a settlement, and it costs money to live in the settlements. I ain't rich enough for that, glad as I'd be to do it."

"You seem to have been rich enough to provide a costly cage for the bird."

"That's so, and it cost a good bit. How do you reckon I got the money? Dug it out of the brook that you had your suspicions about—that and other places. There wasn't much in any pocket I struck, but quite a pile in all, and the cost of buyin' that stuff and gettin' it here in a quiet way was no small matter."

"Enough, I should say, to have given you a chance elsewhere," remarked Hinton.

"Perhaps it might. I don't know as much about that sort of thing as I ought to know. Men who have lived out of the world for so many years don't find it handy to take up with the ways of the world, and it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks. I've done the best I could by Mollie in my way, and as far as I've gone; but there ought to be a change. I know it and feel it, and I know that she feels it. I need to have a pile of money to take me into the settlements, and I think I know how to get it. I've kept puttin' it off and puttin' it off, until you came along and took my eye. Then, thinks I, here's a likely young fellow who seems to have a level head and a heart in the right place, and who would be glad to make a strike, and I will let him into my plans, and see how he takes hold of them. It's a scheme that I've got, and I will tell it to you if you care to listen."

Henry Hinton was glad enough of anything that might tend to bring him closer to the bird in the cage, and was also deeply interested in the shrewd but simple old man.

Therefore, he expressed himself as being not only willing but anxious to listen to the scheme.

"I wouldn't bother you with it," asserted Gabe, "unless I believed that it would be a good thing for you, as well as for me and Mollie. It's no fool of a scheme, I can tell you, and it's a secret, you understand, same as everything else here is."

As he spoke he pointed significantly in the direction of the rear building, and Harry Hinton was prompt with the assurance that all such secrets were safe with him.

CHAPTER VII.

A DEAD MAN'S SILVER.

THE old man's scheme involved the telling of a story, and he told it in his own way.

"It is queer," he said, "how I happened to get hold of this thing, and I've never breathed a word about it before, not even to my boy Gabe when he went off to hunt his fortune. It seemed to me that he was a bit too flighty to be trusted with such a chance alone, and I knew that it would take money to work it out, and I didn't have enough then. Maybe I can make the rifle now."

"It was just when the railroad was opened up out here, and I allowed that I'd take a ride to see how the thing worked, specially as I had some business to the eastward; so I left Mollie here in her cage, with Golo to take care of her, as I'd often done before when I had a party to guide, and went gallivantin' off on the railroad."

"It was sorter pleasant at first, but I soon got tired of ridin' in the cars, and was gettin' to be

mighty lonesome, when we picked up a stranger at a small station. He wasn't more'n a few years younger'n I was, as I judged, rather rough dressed, with the look of a man who had knocked about among the mines, and the hills and the plains for a long time, but with as honest a face as I ever saw on a human.

"He seemed to be mighty happy and jolly, but wasn't a bit overcome with liquor, though he had a bottle in his pocket, as I found out soon enough when he took a seat at my side.

"After a bit he passed me the bottle, and began to talk, and then I knew what it was that made him so happy.

"He was just glad enough to split his skin that the cars were runnin' at last, and that he was aboard of a train, goin' eastward as fast as the steam wagons could carry him.

"I don't care how fast they go," says he. 'The faster the better—that's all. It's years now that I've been achin' to spin along at such a rate over this trail. It means money to me now, and the faster I can go, the quicker the money 'll be comin' in.'

"I kinder encouraged him to go on, and he got to be quite free with his talk.

"I've mined it," says he, 'and mined it, and mined it, until you might think that I'd had enough and more'n enough of that sort o' thing; but I hain't—not by a long jump. I've struck plenty o' prospects that would have made me rich if I'd had a little cash to give me a start in workin' 'em. But I didn't have the money, and so I had to let 'em slide, and I'd sworn that I wouldn't go home till I was rich.'

"I ain't rich now," he went on to say; 'but I've got somethin' that'll bring money in by the cartload, and I'm goin' back to Ohio to tell my folks about it. It's by all odds the biggest find I ever struck, and will make 'em open their eyes. They've got money, or can get it, and this will be sure to bring it out. If you don't believe me, my friend, look at this chunk of silver.'

"I don't pretend to know much about silver, Mr. Hinton; but I can tell it when I see it, and what he pulled out of his pocket and showed me just made my eyes water.

"I happened to kick this up with my foot," says he, 'and there's loads of the same stuff where I got it, and in the most unlikely place to find that you ever heard of.'

"That startled me up, and I thought I saw a good chance to chip in and make a strike for myself.

"What's the use of goin' on to Ohio?" says I. 'Better get rich before you go back, and then astonish the folks. If you've got such a good thing as that, suppose you give me a chance to help you work it. I've got a few thousand dollars that you're welcome to use, if you'll give me a share in the find.'

"Well, Mr. Hinton, he just jumped at that, and we agreed that we would get off at the next station and turn back, and go for that silver in cahoots.

"He talked more about it as we went on, and came nigh givin' me a good pointer for the place.

"It's as safe as safe can be," says he, 'and there ain't a mite of danger that anybody 'll find it. Some folks know where Dead Man's Tree is; but nobody has ever set foot among the rocks to the north of there, and all we've got to do is—'

"That was the last word he said, Mr. Hinton.

"Just then the durned train started to run off the track, and there was a crash and a thumpin', and everybody jumped up, and there was quite a rumpus for a bit.

"I jumped up with the rest, and ran out, and saw that there wasn't much damage done, and worked with the others to help fix things. "Then I went back to where I'd left my partner.

"There he was, sitting up in his seat, just as I had left him, except that he was dead.

"Yes, he was stone dead, and the partnership was wound up almost as soon as it was begun.

"There was a doctor on the train, who examined the man, and said that he had died of heart disease, and that the death-stroke had been caused by that accident to the tram.

"As I was supposed to be a friend of his, I took charge of the body, which was put off at the next station, and I buried it there.

"Of course, I searched it before it was planted, and took care of what he had; but there was mighty little on him besides a small amount of money and that chunk of silver, and a bit of paper with some figurin' on it. Nothin' to show who he was, or who his people were, or where he came from."

"Did he not give you his name?" asked Hinton.

"Well, I sorter heard it. Seems like it was Merritts, or Merts—somethin' of that sort."

"Possibly the name might be of use to us. I suppose you kept the silver?"

"Of course I did. I will get it and show it to you."

The old man brought out a piece of ore, so heavily charged with silver that there was little else in the specimen, and handed it to his guest.

Hinton examined it carefully.

"It is wonderful," he said. "If there is plenty more of the same sort where this came from—and of course there must be—it is a great strike."

"Do you understand silver?" inquired Gabe Cryder.

"Pretty well, from books and specimens that I have studied. I was looking at this chunk with the view of judging whether your man on the train was trying to swindle you, but I perceive that he was not."

"How do you know that?"

"I shall have to tell you a little story, Mr. Cryder."

"I was in the office of a New York assayer, when a man came in who was evidently from the West, and who had probably been a miner. He had a mine to sell—not to the assayer, but to other parties who were ready to buy it—and he wanted some ore assayed, so that he could prove to those parties the value of the mine."

"He showed a sample of his ore, and went on to make a big talk about it, saying that it came from Colorado, and that where he found it he could kick up any amount of it with his feet."

"It is hardly worth while to go to the expense of an assay," said my friend, the assayer, when he had merely glanced at the specimen."

"Why so?" asked the miner.

"Because I can tell you just how it will turn out. That ore is so rich that it will assay three-fourths of its weight in silver."

"But the miner insisted on the assay, and of course my friend promised to attend to the business."

"That man gave himself away," he said to me, when his customer had left the office."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"If he had kept his tongue between his teeth I might not have suspected a swindle. But he had to go on and tell me that this ore came from Colorado, and that he found it on the ground, when I knew at a glance that it was Mexican ore, and had been dug out of a mine. He must think that all New Yorkers are fools. In a few days the man he has been bargaining with will come to get the report of the assay, and it will be my duty to put them on the track of the swindle."

"I was astonished at the ease with which the assayer was able to name the locality of any specimen of ore that was shown to him, and persuaded him to give me instructions in that part of the business."

"He did so, and now I consider myself a fairly good judge of ores."

"So you believe that my man told the truth?" asked Cryder.

"I see no sign of a swindle in anything he said. This is Colorado ore—no question of that—and I can see from the way it is oxydized that it came from the top of the ground. It is fair to conclude that he found it as he said he did, and the only question is whether you can find the place where he claims to have found the ore."

"Well, my boy, I hain't hunted and trapped and guided all over the big divide without gettin' a good notion of the ins and outs of this part of the country, and I know where Dead Man's Tree is. It ain't far from Bloomingdale—Cranch's Gulch they call it now—where I last heard of my boy Gabe. The find, as I take it, must be nigh Dead Man's Tree, and in the most unlikely place about there."

"That will do to start on, anyhow. Possibly the bit of paper you spoke of may help us."

"Maybe you can make somethin' out of it. I couldn't."

Henry Hinton carefully examined the crumpled and soiled piece of paper which the old man handed to him.

"I am afraid that it will be of no use," he remarked. "There seems to be no meaning in it at all. But you had better keep it carefully, Mr. Cryder, as there may be an idea that can be got out of it. If we should find the silver, I have a few thousand dollars that I can call on to help work it."

It was settled that Gabe Cryder and his young friend should go in search of the silver as soon as possible, and Henry Hinton returned to Jintown greatly pleased with the results of his day's prospecting.

CHAPTER VIII.

CRAZY KATE'S WOLF-TRAP.

FAR up the side of a steep and craggy mountain that frowningly faced the afternoon sun was a remarkable structure.

From that elevation there was a wonderful view of mountains and valleys and plains—such a vast expanse of landscape that the view was well worth climbing for.

As a site for a human habitation, however, nothing more ineligible could have been selected.

To be sure, the structure that has been mentioned did not deserve to be called a habitation.

It was not a house, nor even a cabin, and to call it a hovel would be to dignify it beyond its deserts.

Many pig-pens are more substantial, and many chickens have better shelters.

It was only a collection of loose stones—bits of broken rock—rudely and unskillfully piled so as to form three sides of a small square, the fourth being furnished by the cliff against which the structure rested.

Over these shakly walls was stretched a covering of poles, surmounted by a heavy thatch of strong and wiry grass—the only workmanlike portion of the job—and the low and narrow opening was closed by a door of poles, against which a folded blanket was tacked on the inside.

Surely a very poor and untenable habitation, quite unfit for the abode of any human beings.

Yet one human being had occupied it since the autumn of the previous year—a term of nearly six long months.

A woman, at that!

She it was whose then tender and unskilled hands had piled up the stones, cut and laid the poles, gathered and woven the thatch, and framed the rude door.

It was she who had toiled up the rugged mountain-side, bringing what she needed a long distance and over a difficult route, with not a handful of help from any other human being.

She it was who had lived there alone during those weary months, and only she and God knows how she had got through the hard winter.

But the wild and bitter blasts that had swept the mountain had neither frozen her to death nor tumbled down her untenable tenement, and the snows that had piled up in terrible drifts had only served the merciful purpose of fencing her in and keeping out the cold.

And now the spring had come, and she was alive and well, apparently none the worse for her isolation and her contact with the elements.

It must have been a strange freak that could cause her to erect and inhabit such an abode in such a situation, and a strange woman who could take such a freak.

And she was a strange woman, being the same person of whom Gabe Cryder had spoken at Jintown as known by the name of Crazy Kate.

The sun had got around to the western side of the mountain, as it was then a little after noon, and Crazy Kate was seated on a rock in front of her cabin, presumably enjoying the sunshine—at least, she was basking in it.

No person who could have looked at her then would wonder at any strange freak that might seize her.

She was surely a remarkable specimen of womankind.

Though scarcely under the average height of her sex, her extreme thinness made her look small, to which appearance her pinched and weatherbeaten face contributed.

Her face was that of an old woman, and yet she was surely not old.

A physiognomist would have said that suffering had caused the premature lines in her face and the premature streaks of gray in her still abundant hair.

In that face there were two shocking points that hinted at a terrible story.

Her wild and restless eyes spoke of an unbalanced mind, and a hideous scar on her left cheek, extending from the eye to the chin, told of a frightful physical injury.

She was clothed in a worn but comfortable woolen dress, and yet she hugged herself as if the cold oppressed her.

"It's a nice day," she was telling herself—"sweet, bright day for a picnic. If I was somewhere and somebody now, I would be at a picnic, just as I used to be when they called me pretty Alice Marden."

From this statement it is safe to assume that Crazy Kate's name, whatever it may have been, was surely not Kate.

"Pretty Alice!" she murmured. "Humph! That's over with, anyhow, and everything else is over with, I guess. Everything but *him*. Wonder if he would call me pretty Alice now, if he should see me. But I don't want him to see me. It's I who want to see *him*. Only once—that's all."

"Nice day for him to come. It's years and years that I've been waiting for him here, with everything ready for him, and still he don't come along. I want him to come once—just once. If he knew that I've got money, I think he'd come."

Suddenly she started, and her wild eyes flashed as she looked down the mountain-side—flushed with the fire of eager, triumphant anticipation.

"There he comes!" she exclaimed. "At last he comes! Nothing more to wait for now. I must be sure that everything is ready for him."

She hastened into the hovel, and soon emerged, carrying a small leather sachel.

With the agility of a goat she climbed the rocks, but did not go far.

She settled down behind a jagged bit of cliff that completely concealed her, but from which position she could plainly see her hovel and its

surroundings, and her eyes blazed as she looked, like those of a wild beast.

The person of whom she had caught sight was the man who had introduced himself at Jintown as Bob Strahan, and he was slowly working his way up the mountain-side.

There was a scarcely perceptible trail that led up to the hovel, and in this he was picking his path, grumbling and cursing as he progressed.

"I wonder if it's her," he said, regardless of the requirements of grammar. "Of course it's her, though. The old skunk at Jintown told me enough to make me sure of that. Crazy, too. Of course she is crazy, or she would never have started in to live alone all winter away up this mountain."

"Wonder if she lived through the winter. Of course she did, though. She'd live through anything. Durned strange that she lived through the deal I gave her, and the strangest thing of all is that just when I had got rid of her I heard that her uncle had died and left her a lot of money."

"She got the money, too—smart enough for that. Wonder if she's kept it! Like as not she has. There's no accountin' for crazy folks. If she *has* got it, it will be queer if I don't get hold of it, one way or another."

"Where is her durned shebang, anyhow? There it is! Is it possible that she has been livin' all winter in such a crib as that?"

He halted as he came in sight of the hovel, and carefully examined it and its surroundings. Then he approached it cautiously and stealthily, as he had crept upon young Hinton in the valley.

"I must sorter slide up on her," he muttered. "If she should get sight of me before I come within reach, she might play some kind of a game on me. There's no accountin' for crazy folks."

As he silently neared the hovel those wild eyes behind the jagged piece of cliff were watching his every movement.

He opened the rickety door, and sneaked in.

The place was empty!

A look of disgust came over his dark forbidding face as his glance took in the meager appointments of the small and mean apartment.

In one corner, piled upon poles that rested on string-pieces supported by crotched stakes driven into the ground, was a bed of boughs and grass covered with blankets.

At the cliff side was a fireplace of the rudest possible construction, in which were ashes but no fire, and near it were a very few cooking utensils of the cheapest and most primitive quality.

There was no table, and a rough block of wood did duty as a chair.

A small wooden box probably did duty as a receptacle for provisions, and a few worn articles of woman's apparel hung from pegs inserted between crevices of the rock wall.

Over the bed hung a marriage-certificate, unframed, that recorded the nuptials of Robert Strahan and Alice Marden.

And it was in this gloomy, unfurnished, and altogether uncomfortable den that she had lived during the weary months of that hard winter, with no being, human or unhuman, to bear her company, with no occupation but that of supporting life, eating her heart out in solitude.

The thought was enough to move the hardest nature to pity, and it may be that tough Bob Strahan felt a faint touch of tenderness.

"Durned if I see how she did it," he muttered. "She must be as crazy as a loon, and I've heard it said that the Lord takes care of crazy folks. Wonder what's become of her. Where on earth could she have gone to? Reckon it's just as well that she's away, though. I'll go through the shebang, and if she's got any money here I'll be apt to get it. If I don't find it, I'll look her up again. Hello! there's her marriage-certificate. Queer that she should keep that. She must fancy that there's some sort of a scheme in that; but it's more likely to be of use to me, and I will just pocket it and take it along."

As he spoke he did not hear the fizzing of a small gray tube on the outside, nor did he know how rapidly that fizzing was approaching the hovel.

He stepped toward the bed, and the ground rose under his feet with a flash of fire, a big puff of smoke, a sulphurous smell, and a loud noise.

The rickety walls tumbled inward and outward, the crazy roof upward, and in place of the hovel was a mass of rock and earth and rubbish, from which ascended a cloud of smoke and dust.

After a while the man extricated himself from the ruins, his face blackened, his clothes torn, and blood showing on his head and hands.

When the explosion occurred, Crazy Kate rose quickly from her position of concealment, and glared wildly at the scene; but, when the man emerged from the wreck, she dropped down behind the rocks again.

He gathered himself together, shook his limbs to make sure that no bones were broken, picked his way out of the ruin, and then, without a word or a grumble, and without a look in any direction but straight before him, limped slowly down the mountain-side.

When he was fairly out of the way the wo-

man came forth from her concealment, and approached the heap of still smoking rock and rubbish.

Her eyes had a milder look than before, and her pinched face wore an expression of disappointment.

"It worked, and it didn't work," she said. "Better luck next time. No use in staying here any longer."

The marriage-certificate was visible among the debris, and she picked it up, brushed the dirt from it, folded it carefully, and placed it in her sachel.

Then she followed the faint trail down the mountain-side.

When Bob Strahan presented himself at Jintown in the evening, he was bantered about his dilapidated appearance, and was asked if he had been having an encounter with a wildcat.

He said that he had been up in the mountains, and had treated himself to a severe fall.

CHAPTER IX.

DEATH IN THE TRACK.

BLOOMINGDALE was situated in one of the most beautiful of the valleys that adorn the great divide which cuts the big State of Colorado in two.

Like Jintown, it scarcely had an existence except in name.

As in the case of Jintown, a speculator had taken up the land, expecting that a railroad would run through the valley, and that a town would be established there.

But the railroad had never been built, nor even surveyed, and Bloomingdale had been left in its wild luxuriance until reports of the finding of precious metal caused a rush thither.

Then Bloomingdale became known as Cranch's Gulch, and the valley was quickly dotted with cabins and shanties and tents, and its beauty was speedily destroyed by the ruthless use of picks and shovels.

It would take years for nature, lavish as she is of her labor, to hide the traces of that vile disfigurement.

But the mining excitement had proved to be as illusory as the railroad.

The miners, after unanimously voting Cranch's Gulch to be no go, had departed in disgust, but without carrying away their cabins and shanties, which were left to the usual course of dilapidation and decay.

So it came to pass that in process of time the trenches and holes, with the piles of earth and gravel, were gradually overgrown with grass and other varieties of verdure, effacing their deformities, but without fully restoring the valley to its pristine beauty.

In the course of time, too, even the ugly cabins and shanties, or those of them of which reasonable remnants were left, took on the appearance of picturesqueness, as nature, building upon their decay, adorned them with vines and clinging foliage.

Such was Cranch's Gulch, formerly Bloomingdale, when two mounted men came down the valley one pleasant spring afternoon.

One of them was an old man, and the other was a young man, and they rode slowly, looking about and before them, one at least with an eye to the scenery, and both with an eye to the business that had brought them there.

It might have been supposed that the day and the situation would be sufficient to distract their minds from anything in the way of business.

The air was so clear, so soft, and so balmy, and the abundant foliage was so fresh and of such a tender green, that a man need do nothing but satisfy his senses and be thankful that he was able to enjoy such a day and such a scene.

Every thicket was vocal with the songs of birds, and in the air they flew and skirmished at their sweet wills, heedless of all manner of intruders.

Squirrels frisked and chattered in the trees, cottontails skurried across the trail that led down the valley, and prairie dogs cheeped as they stood on their haunches at the mouth of their burrows, or showed their hind feet as they dived at sight of the travelers.

The scene was calculated to drive away sordid or practical thoughts; yet the two riders talked as if each wished the other to believe he was thinking of nothing but business.

They were the old Mountain Tramp and Henry Hinton, and the manner of their conversation showed that they had become intimate friends.

"So this is Bloomingdale, Mr. Cryder," observed the young man.

"Yes, Harry, that's the name it once had. It has since been called Cranch's Gulch, and I reckon it can get along without a name now just as well as not, as it seems to be even a little worse played out than Jintown is. A man can get whisky in Jintown, anyhow; but I doubt if Cranch's Gulch could furnish as much as a meal of victuals."

The old man spoke as if a meal would be a matter of no importance, compared with whisky.

"But your son was here when you heard from him last, Uncle Gabe. What had brought him here?"

He sent word to me by a man who was comin' up Jintown way, and that man said that Gabe had got it into his head that there was somethin' to be picked up here, and that he meant to stop and try for it. But he soon found out, I reckon, that there was no sort o' use in that, and lit out to find a better chance."

"And is Dead Man's Tree near here?" inquired the young man.

"A little further down the valley, and up the side of the hill. But it ain't much of a step, and I reckon we had better camp right here, so that we can branch out in any direction, and any folks who might happen along wouldn't be apt to guess what we're up to."

"Then we may as well take up our lodging in one of these old cabins. Some of them are standing yet, and look as if they might be fit to live in."

"That's so, Harry, and there is one that somebody is livin' in now, or has lived in lately. It's got a sort o' homelike look to it."

"We will try that one, then, if you say so. If it happens to be occupied, we may get some news of your son."

"Of course we may. More likely than not. That would be worth comin' for, of itself. If we could only run across Gabe, we needn't ask to be better fixed."

They rode up to the cabin, which stood on the slope of the valley, and hallooed with true frontier courtesy.

There was no answer to their hail, nor was there any sign of life about the place.

They dismounted, and knocked loudly at the door, but got no response.

"Nobody at home," said the old man. "But the latch string is hangin' out, and we may as well walk in."

They opened the door, and entered.

The only occupant of the cabin was a corpse!

The light of the afternoon sun, streaming in through the open doorway, showed it with horrible plainness, as it lay on the rude floor near a small table.

It was the corpse of a young man, hardly out of his boyhood, to judge by his looks as he lay there, flat on his back, his feet toward the door, and his arms extended outward.

His hair was long and fair, and the sunshine lighted it up like gold.

It also lighted up a hideous gash in the top of his head, and a big pool of blood that stained the floor.

Gabe, who was the first to enter, stood and stared at this unexpected sight.

Then he raised his hands, with a wailing cry of agony, stumbled forward, and threw himself on the floor at the side of the corpse.

"My boy!" he exclaimed. "Oh, Gabe! my own boy! who has done this?"

He had realized the joyous wish that he had spoken as he approached the cabin.

He had "run across Gabe," but it was Gabe no longer—only a mangled lump of cold clay, that could not respond to his caresses or be touched by his grief.

Henry Hinton stood and gazed at the dead in helpless silence, without attempting to interrupt the old man's moaning, knowing that no word of his would then avail to soften that terrible agony.

After a while the stricken father rose to his feet, looking as if years had been laid upon him since he entered that cabin.

But his face was hard and set, full of a stern determination.

"That is all, Harry," he said. "It is my boy, and he is dead. But he has been murdered, and we must find the murderer, and—and settle with him."

Then Hinton looked about the cabin, to take note of all the circumstances surrounding the tragedy, with the view of tracing the villain who had done the deed.

He first examined the body, and satisfied himself, from its condition, and from the blood that had flowed from the wound, that it was not many hours since young Gabe Cryder met his death.

Further evidence of this fact was found in an uneaten meal on the table, which had evidently been breakfast.

The instrument with which the deed was done had been left there in plain sight, just as it had been thrown down by the murderer. It was an ax, and the blade was stained with blood.

As a search showed that one of the victim's pockets was turned out, and that there were no valuables on his person, it was clear that the murder had been committed for the purpose of robbery.

Yes, there was one valuable thing left. A gold locket that had hung around the young man's neck by a string, was still there, and it was open, disclosing the portrait of a young woman.

"Is that his mother's portrait?" inquired Hinton.

The old man shuddered as he answered.

"No—that is the picture of my first wife, the one who ran away. Gabe had a fancy for it, and I let him keep it."

Hinton removed the locket, closed it, and handed it to his friend, who refused it with a gesture of repugnance.

"No—I don't want that."

"I will keep it, then," said the young man, and he went on to complete his search.

The locket puzzled him.

Why had the murderer made a clean sweep of everything else of value, but left that locket?

Possibly because he was unwilling to deprive his victim of what might be his mother's picture or possibly because he feared it might lead to his identification.

Neither of these suppositions was entirely satisfactory to the young engineer, and he put the question aside with the locket for future consideration.

The table had apparently been set for two, and this led to the conclusion that young Gabe Cryder had had a guest or a partner, for whom he was getting breakfast.

There could be no doubt that it was while he was preparing the meal that he was stricken down.

Was the other person, then, a partner or a guest?

Hinton was strongly inclined to believe that he was a guest.

There seemed to be no articles of clothing in the cabin but such as had belonged to the dead man.

A partner might have killed him and carried off his own belongings; but he would have left something.

Furthermore, an examination of the couch showed pretty plainly that but one person had slept there.

Outside there were tracks of a horse, and Grizzly Gabe examined them.

He was positive that a man had ridden up to the cabin during the morning of that day, had hitched his horse, had remained an indefinite time—not a long time—and had then ridden away.

Hinton then regarded it settled that young Cryder had been murdered by a casual guest, who had violated his hospitality by killing and robbing him.

But why had the murderer left that locket?

CHAPTER X.

DEAD MAN'S TREE.

"COME, Harry!" fiercely ordered the old man. "We must hunt the scoundrel who killed my boy."

Hinton made a gesture toward the corpse that lay on the floor of the cabin.

"That must wait," said the old man. "We must pick up the trail while it is hot. Then we will come back and care for the lad. Come on!"

"Wait a moment."

Perceiving that his friend was hardly in his right senses, the engineer took a blanket from the couch, and spread it over the corpse.

Then he wrote a few words on a piece of paper, informing any persons who might happen along that they were going in search of the murderer, and would return to claim the body.

This he placed on the table, and went out with the old man, carefully closing the door of the cabin.

It was easy for the Mountain Tramp to pick up the murderer's trail, and he rode on rapidly when he had once marked it, with Henry Hinton at his heels.

They followed the trail without difficulty up the valley, and for a considerable distance as it crossed the plain above.

But they were disappointed at last.

As the day was drawing to a close they followed it into the main road that led toward Denver, and there it was lost in the multitude of tracks of horses and cattle and teams.

"No use tryin' to follow him any further," said the old man.

"I suppose so," answered Henry. "If he had taken that locket, there might have been a chance to fasten the crime on him. I wonder why he left it."

They returned sadly to Cranch's Gulch.

No person seemed to have been there since they left the cabin, and they buried the body of young Gabe Cryder by moonlight, making the grave with a board on which the initials were rudely cut.

"We can't stay here now, Mr. Cryder," observed the engineer, when this task was finished.

"Of course we can't. We will go further down the valley, and camp in the open."

They soon found an eligible place to camp, and decided to remain there, at least while they were searching for the dead man's silver.

A shelter could easily be built that would serve their purpose quite as well as any of the abandoned tenements at Bloomingdale.

They started a fire at the spot they had selected, ate a bit of supper, and slept in their blankets on the ground.

In the morning they set at work to build the shelter.

They had brought from Jintown an ax, a hammer, a bag of provisions, and a few necessary utensils for feeding purposes—as much as they had cared to carry.

The ax was sufficient for their building needs, though they would have been better pleased if a saw and an auger had been added to the assortment.

The shanty was easy to build, as young tree

trunks were plentiful, and it was a small affair, not much higher than their heads in the front, and sloping to a few feet from the ground at the rear.

But time was required to do the work, as there was only one ax, and that was wielded by Gabe, as his young friend was quite inexperienced at that sort of woodcraft.

The work was good for the old man, however.

After the heavy blow that had fallen on him it was just the thing he needed to brace him up and withdraw his mind from his sorrow.

Though he scarcely made any further allusion to the death of his boy, Hinton could plainly see that it had affected him terribly. Years seemed to have been added to his age, and the lines of his face had deepened, and occasionally he brushed a suspicious moisture from his eyes.

The engineer would have been glad to get the ax that was left at Cranch's Gulch, so that he might help in the labor; but the old man's trouble was so manifest, that it would not do even to wish for a tool that had been stained with the blood of his son.

At the noon rest, when they were smoking their pipes after eating their frugal meal, the father brought up the subject of the lad's murder—but it was with a new view of the matter—one which had not yet occurred to his young friend.

"I don't know," he said, "how I am ever going to break this to Mollie. 'She was powerful fond of poor Gabe, and has been grieving about him ever since he went away.'"

It began to be clear to Hinton that his friend must not be allowed to dwell on that subject, for fear that it might break him down entirely.

"You must try to think of something else, Mr. Cryder," said the engineer. "The poor lad is dead, and no amount of grief can bring him to life. We will have time enough while we are at work here to think of the best way of breaking the sad news to your daughter. Just now I think it will be best for us to put our minds on our work. What sort of a place is it that you call Dead Man's Tree, and how far is it from this camp?"

"It's no sort of a place at all, my boy. It's a tree, and there it is—the dead tree that you see yonder," and the old mountaineer pointed at a blasted or withered pine that was plainly visible on the opposite hillside.

It was indeed a remarkable object, that one tall, dead tree in the midst of a mass of foliage.

It did not seem to have been struck by lightning, and it was so strange that this tree alone, of all its congeners, should be bare and leafless.

"What is the matter with the tree, and how did it get its name?" inquired Hinton.

"I will tell you the story, my boy. No man can know it better than I do, as I was there, and saw as much of what happened as any man could see.

"It was several years ago, just before the Cranch's Gulch fever that died out so soon. I was guiding a party of Eastern men, who had been hunting and having a good time over the divide during the fall. They were staying out 'most too late, and I told them so, as a cold snap might strike us any day. But they were having a fine time, as the weather suited them exactly, and the hunting was good, and they insisted on staying.

"We stayed, and the cold snap came, and caught us hard. It was a regular blizzard, one of the worst kind, with a bitter cold wind that went right through the flesh, and oceans of hail and sleet that froze everything up as quick as winkin'. All we could do was to put our horses in as good a shelter as possible, and huddle together and shiver through it, just able to keep from freezing.

"But there was one of us who didn't huddle, and couldn't huddle. That was a Dutchman named Steiner, an Omaha man, and one of the best fellows in the party. It was near night when the blizzard struck us, and he had gone out after dinner on a little hunt of his own. He had seen something—he wouldn't say what it was—and wanted to get a point ahead of us.

"But he hadn't got back when the blizzard set in, and we could hardly get a wink of sleep that night, let alone the cold, for worryin' about poor Steiner.

"When mornin' came the weather had eased off, and we could get about fairly well. We were just wild to give up the hunt and get to a settlement, but yet wilder to hunt Steiner and know what had become of him.

"Naturally we didn't expect when we set out to find him alive; but we were bound to find him, and so we scoured the country far and near, making the hills and hollows echo with our yells.

"When we came up this valley I was on the far side there, pretty well up the hill, and I caught sight of a man sitting on the ground against Dead Man's Tree.

"The tree was then green and healthy enough to look at.

"I allowed that the man was Steiner, and called to the others, and we went toward him together; but I didn't wonder that he gave no answer to our hails.

"There he was, sitting with his back against

the tree, his head drooped on his breast, and his rifle across his lap, frozen stiff, and as dead as a man could be.

"It was then near night, and we camped in this very spot.

"In the mornin' we went to get poor Steiner's body, and that green and healthy tree was as dead as Steiner was—scarcely a green sprig on it anywhere.

"I don't pretend to say what it was that killed the tree; but it made us all feel mighty queer, I can tell you.

"We put Steiner's body on his horse and carried it to a settlement, where we got it fixed up so that it could go to Denver, and from there his friends took it on to Omaha.

"That's how Dead Man's Tree got its name; but I can't guess what killed it."

CHAPTER XI.

A CRY IN THE NIGHT.

HENRY HINTON, when he had found Dead Man's Tree and heard its story, was anxious to begin the search for the rich deposit of silver that was supposed to exist in the neighborhood.

He was more anxious, it seemed, than his old friend was, as Gabe had been so badly stunned by the murder of his son that it was difficult for him to take an interest in anything.

The engineer would have begun the search on his own account, had it not been that his services were required in the erection of the shanty.

Though there was only one ax, he was needed to help in carrying the logs and lifting them to their places, and the old man insisted on his staying about, even when there was nothing for him to do, seeming to be extremely unwilling to let Henry get out of his sight.

At last they had a sufficiently commodious and comfortable shelter erected, though the roof was not calculated to keep out the wet, and there was no door.

But an opening had been chopped out for a door, and they expected to pick one up, in the course of time, among the old cabins at Cranch's Gulch.

This labor had occupied the greater part of two days, and it was not until the morning of the third that they were really ready for business.

But Hinton then had the satisfaction of perceiving that his old friend was in a decidedly better mood.

The clouds had at least partially passed from his mind, and he was eager to begin operations in search of the silver.

Before starting, and while he was smoking his pipe after breakfast, the engineer again examined the bit of paper that had been found on the person of the man who was stricken dead on the train.

He had frequently studied it before, but without being able to find any meaning in it, and at this time, though he examined it in view of Dead Man's Tree, he was equally unsuccessful.

Yet he was sure that it must have been intended as a guide, though a very blind one, to the location of the silver deposit.

The scribbling had been roughly done on an old piece of paper with a lead pencil. The first object was evidently intended for a tree, being a straight perpendicular line with marks toward the top that must have been meant for branches. It was followed by the letter X repeated six times. Then came a rude representation of a human head in profile, the features of which might easily be supposed to be those of an Indian, and this supposition was strengthened by something on the top of the head that might be taken for an Indian's head-dress.

This figure was followed by the letter X repeated four times.

"Study this as I may, I can't make anything out of it," said the young man.

It was not the first time that he had made the same remark; but his despairing tone indicated his final disgust with the problem.

"I can't help thinking that it is meant for a guide," he went on to say; "but, if there is any sense in it, I confess that I am unable to see it. This thing at the left hand corner is a tree, and I suppose that we must take it to mean Dead Man's Tree. If so, we have something to start from. But we had that much without the paper, and I must confess that I can't even guess at the meaning of the face and those X's. I have puzzled over the thing until I am sick of the sight of it."

"Perhaps, my boy," suggested Cryder, "it was never intended for any sort of a guide, and I reckon we had better drop it, as it is more likely to bother us than to help us. We know that the silver is somewhere near Dead Man's Tree, if it's anywhere, and in an unlikely place. So we must start from Dead Man's Tree, and hunt all around it, and in the most unlikely places we can find. That's plain enough."

It was plain enough, to be sure, at least as a matter of theory.

But, when it came to put the theory into practice, the results were highly unsatisfactory.

They ascended the hillside to Dead Man's Tree, and examined the locality from that point, with the view of judging which direction would be the most favorable for their operations.

As well as the seekers could judge, all directions were equally unfavorable.

Below Dead Man's Tree the land sloped not very abruptly to the bottom of the valley, and the slope, though rocky in places, was generally well covered with earth and grass.

From the tree upward the slope was steeper and more broken, rapidly growing rougher until it mingled with the mountainous heights above.

A short distance beyond the tree was a sort of ledge or step in the hill, too small and narrow to be styled a plateau, and of consequence only as a resting-place in climbing the hill.

All directions, as has been said, were equally uncertain, and it could make little difference where or how they began the search.

As they had laid aside the bit of paper, and had decided that they would trust to luck, they could only knock around at random, hoping that chance would favor them.

From Dead Man's Tree they sallied out toward all quarters of the compass, taking in a pretty extensive circuit, and leaving scarcely a foot of land within that range untrod.

Everywhere the engineer examined the formation carefully, and everywhere he knocked off bits of rock, some of which he inspected with his microscope; but nowhere did he find silver or any indications of that precious metal.

Nothing came of this exhaustive search but weariness and disappointment.

At nightfall they sadly returned to their camp, and Hinton admitted that he was discouraged.

"I'm kinder discouraged, too," responded the old man. "When my friend on the train told me that it was near Dead Man's Tree, I felt as if I could e'en a'most go to it blindfolded, no matter what an unlikely place it might be hid in. And when I got hold of a smart young engineer, who had a head for silver, I allowed that it must be nigh about a sure thing. But it seems that my eyes and your head hain't counted for anything this day."

"For nothing but disappointment and vexation," answered Hinton.

"Yes, so far; but maybe there's better luck ahead. Seems like you gave up easier than I did, though you are young and ought to be more hopeful than an old man. You must remember, Harry, that the silver, as my friend on the railroad said, is in a mighty unlikely place."

"All the places are unlikely, Uncle Gabe. There is not a sign of silver anywhere near Dead Man's Tree, and that is what discourages me."

"We must look further, then. When he said it was near the tree he spoke a wide word. It's hard to tell what a man out in this country means by *near*. One ranch is near another when it is many miles away. I don't suppose my friend meant it as wide as that; but he may have hit on Dead Man's Tree only as a landmark, or a point that people knew, and have meant to say that the silver was in the neighborhood of that point."

"Well, Uncle Gabe, I suppose we must take a wider circuit and look closer. Perhaps we won't feel so badly discouraged after we have slept on it."

They slept on it in their new shanty; but in the morning there was no question of searching for silver, as they were then out of sight of Dead Man's Tree and Cranch's Gulch.

About two hours before day Henry Hinton awoke with a start and an outcry.

He vigorously shook his companion, who sat up and stared at him.

"What's the matter?" demanded the old man.

"Had a nightmare, my boy?"

"No. It was a dream; but it is true. I know it is true!"

"What sort of a dream?"

"About your daughter. She is in danger."

"Mollie in danger? How do you know? What do you mean?"

"I heard her voice as plainly as you hear mine at this moment, and it was quite as real. She called you, and she called me, and it was for help that she was calling. She is in danger, and we must go to her."

As Hinton told the story of his dream he infected the old man with his excitement, and both became so full of it that they could scarcely contain themselves.

He had seen Mollie Cryder in the house on the hill near Jimtown, alone in her richly-furnished apartment.

She seemed to be holding the heavy log door against the efforts of some person who was striving to force an entrance, and all the while she was calling for help—calling her father, and calling Henry Hinton.

There was little of it; but that little was so distinct and lifelike that it impressed the young man as a real event that had taken place in his immediate presence, and for which he had the certain evidence of his senses.

He conveyed this impression to Old Gabe so completely, that the old man believed in the reality of the event as firmly as the dreamer did.

They made the hastiest possible preparations—indeed, there was very little to prepare—as-tonished their horses by saddling them in the

darkness, and dashed away up the valley at a speed which they meant to keep up as long as they could.

They kept it up for hours, without stopping to eat or drink, until the condition of their horses admonished them that they must halt for a rest.

But it was a very brief rest, and again they were up and off.

During the entire journey it was only the requirements of mercy toward the animals they rode—the necessity of keeping those faithful servants alive—that compelled the riders to make such stoppages as gave them rest and refreshment.

All this time there was no question of the reality of Hinton's vision, considered as a representation of an actual event and a pressing danger.

There was only one doubt that pressed upon their minds.

"We will be too late!" frequently moaned the old man.

"Let us hope not," answered Hinton. "The voice would never have come to me unless there had been a chance for us if we should obey it, and we did obey it instantly."

"Why didn't she call on Golo? Do you suppose that he was dead, or that he was away from her?"

"I don't like to guess. We can only hope and pray that she is alive and safe."

So they rode on and on, until at last, in the gray of the morning, they rode up on the plateau toward the old Mountain Tramp's double habitation.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CAUSE OF THE CRY.

MOLLIE CRYDER had a moping, lonesome, weary time of it after her father and Henry Hinton went in search of the silver.

It is not too much to say that she longed for the young man more than she grieved over the absence of the old one and this was quite natural.

Hinton was not the first young man she had seen, but was the only one possessed of any attractions of mind or person who had yet come into her life.

He was the only one she had seen in a long time, too, and their meeting had been so romantic and wonderful.

Even the commonplace manner in which he was afterward brought to her cage by her father, where he made her acquaintance in an ordinary and proper style, had not robbed that event of its romance.

Her one consolation was that as he had become associated with her father in a business matter, she might hope to see him again at no distant day.

Her amusements and occupations were scanty enough, poor girl! and Golo could hardly be considered as company, and it is no wonder that her thoughts dwelt on her father's young friend in his absence.

She dwelt upon him until his image was impressed upon her mind and heart, and pictured him in many situations, weaving harmless romances about him that helped her to pass the time in her gilded cage.

But this was not sufficient.

It was spring-time, and her seclusion during the long and dreary winter had been so complete and so tiresome, that it was almost impossible for her to stay shut up when all nature was awake and stirring.

She was obliged to open her heavy window, and then the bright days, and the birds, and the beauty that was bursting forth from everything, all beckoned and enticed her, until her gilded cage became a prison to her.

It was her father's command that she should not go out during his absence, except when she should be accompanied by Golo.

Though she knew that the giant half-breed was so thoroughly devoted to her that he was at all times ready to lay down his life for her, yet he was not altogether an agreeable companion, and frequently solitude was preferable to his society.

But she could endure seclusion no longer, and one beautiful and balmy day she sallied forth with Golo.

She bent her course to the valley in which she had first met the young engineer, went over the route which she had followed that day, and tried to picture to herself the manner of that meeting and revive the pleasure it had given her.

But the hour was not propitious, and she insisted on waiting until the mist of evening fell over the scene, clothing it in the soft and filmy veil that had made that memorable evening so lovely.

Golo was willing to wait, and he allowed her to ramble at will, with the single restriction that she should not go out of sight of a tree near which he had posted himself.

She did not wander far; but he lost sight of her, just as she met with another adventure.

Again she went over the course which she remembered so well, returning as she had returned before.

Again she stood where she had stood before, and looked as she had then looked toward the

spot where she had dimly seen the hero of her romance.

Again she saw him there, and again he pursued her.

At least, she saw a man there, and the coincidence was so striking that she fancied for a moment that the events of that evening were to be rehearsed for her benefit.

But she was speedily undeceived.

The tall form of her present pursuer, bending forward, as he started to run at an Indian lope, was totally different from the trim figure of Henry Hinton with its picturesque stride.

She knew the difference instantly, and ran at her best speed, without losing her presence of mind, toward the tree which Golo had pointed out to her.

He was there, and saw her running, but had no reason for supposing just then that there was any special cause for her speed.

She looked behind, saw that her pursuer was rapidly overhauling her, and uttered a cry for help which the deformed giant at once understood, especially as he caught sight at the same moment of the man who was following her.

With a yell such as might be emitted from the throat of an enraged wild beast he ran toward her, making remarkable speed with his awkward and shambling gait.

She sunk upon the ground as she met him, so exhausted that some moments passed before she had strength to tell the story of the pursuit and her fright.

Golo, nearly bursting with rage, sought the man who had pursued her; but he had disappeared, and was not to be found.

Then he took the frightened girl home, and shut her up in her cage.

But the pursuer was not to be balked in that way.

He was the same tall and rough-looking person, hailing from Pike's Peak, who had endeavored to bully Henry Hinton in Jintown, who had stolen a march on the young man in the valley, and who had suffered in the wreck of Crazy Kate's hovel.

He followed them stealthily up to the plateau, carefully keeping out of their sight, and marked the home of the ill-assorted pair and their manner of entering it.

The next day Mollie Cryder had occasion to open her window to let in the soft and fresh outdoor air, and it had been open but a little while when, as she happened to glance up at it, she saw framed there a man's face, evil, forbidding, gazing into the apartment with an eager and hungry look.

She jumped up with a scream, ran to the window; and closed the heavy log shutter by the exertion of all her strength.

Her scream brought the half-breed to her, and she told him what she had seen.

Golo armed himself, and hastened out to hunt the intruder.

He found tracks of a strange man under the window and elsewhere in the vicinity; but the man was nowhere visible.

Thereafter poor Mollie was kept in a state of continual alarm and uneasiness.

She caused Golo to go out frequently during the day to look for suspicious persons or signs of such; but the giant, though cautious and watchful, found nothing of the kind.

Though his reports were so favorable, Mollie's fears compelled her to keep her house tightly closed, uncomfortable as it was to be shut up in that fashion during the bright spring weather.

At night she retired to rest as usual, and Golo went to sleep behind the screen that shut off the fire-place.

She was awakened by a noise on the outside of the house—such a noise as indicated an attempt to force an entrance at the window—and she called Golo.

He was already on the alert, having heard the noise as soon as she did, and he sallied out to apprehend and punish the prowler.

In passing out through the old man's cabin he did not entirely close the heavy door that moved on rollers, but left it nearly half open.

Mollie, who had risen and thrown on a wrapper, approached the door shortly after the giant had gone out.

By the light of the lamp, which was always burning in her room, she saw the dark form of a man stealing through the outer cabin.

She knew at once that it was not Golo, and was quite sure that it was the same man who had pursued her in the valley.

She screamed, and would have attempted to shut the door, but he was too quick for her.

"Shut your mouth, or I'll kill you!" was his savage command, as he rushed into the room and clutched at the frightened girl.

She eluded his grasp, and screamed again and again at the top of her voice.

Her screams brought the half-breed to her assistance.

Uttering his wild-beast roar as he came, the giant stumbled into the room, grabbed the intruder, flung him bodily through the partly-open door, and followed him into the cabin.

Mollie stepped to the doorway, intending to check her defender before he should trample her enemy to death.

But the tables had been quickly changed.

The awkward giant had slipped and fallen on the floor of the cabin, while his antagonist had picked himself up immediately and had drawn a revolver.

It was leveled at the fallen giant, and Mollie was nearly deafened and blinded by the flash and the report.

Again and again the bullets were sent into the body of the then helpless half-breed, until he rolled over on the floor, with his face toward his young mistress.

"Shut the door!" he cried hoarsely, the tones almost mingling with the death-rattle in his throat.

It was the first and the last word she ever heard her wild servitor speak.

The instinct of self-preservation impelled her to instant and strenuous action. She put all her strength into an effort to close the heavy log door, and succeeded, shooting the stout oaken bar into its fastenings just as the miscreant in the cabin, perceiving her purpose an instant too late, threw himself against the logs.

He pushed against the door, and battered it with a billet of wood that he found there, but all to no purpose; it was as firm as rock.

"You had better open up there!" he shouted, from his side of the wall. "I won't hurt you if you do. If you don't, you are likely to suffer."

But Mollie had no idea of opening the door and letting in the wolf, nor would she have had the strength to do so at that moment if she had wished to.

Her only defender was dead, and her father was far away, and there was no person to help her but herself, and she was determined to protect herself as long as there was breath left in her body.

The assailant seemed to have brought in a log, with which he endeavored to drive the door inward; but Mollie had set the other heavy bar in its place, and his efforts were ineffective.

After a while he went around to the window, and made similar efforts to force an entrance there; but that was also stoutly barred, and his labor was of no avail.

Neither there nor elsewhere was he likely to make any serious impression upon the heavy log walls without the use of suitable tools, and Mollie was almost sure that there were no tools in her father's cabin which would serve his purpose.

Yet it was possible that he might effect an entrance somehow, and she had determined in that event to defend herself to the death.

Golo's rifle had been thrown down in the cabin when he rushed upon the intruder, and his pistol was on his person when he was killed; but she had her own revolver, with skill and courage to use it.

If she should not be able to make an end of her assailant, she could at least make an end of herself.

There was food in the house, and she forced herself to eat a portion, feeling the need of strength to sustain her in the toils and trials that surely lay before her.

It was long and painful waiting through the weary hours of morning, and the strain upon the poor girl's nerves was so great that she actually began to long for some demonstration on the part of her invisible foe, as even that might give her the relief that she longed for.

It seemed probable, even if he should be unable to effect an entrance, that she would be kept in a state of siege for an indefinite period of time, and what would become of her?

Hearing nothing of her enemy, she deemed it possible that he had gone to get tools, with which to cut through the heavy hewn logs.

If she could know that to be a fact, it would seem to be her best plan to slip out during his absence, and make her way to Jintown, where she would be sure to find help.

But she had no means of ascertaining his whereabouts, and the risk was too great to be run.

It was near noon by her handsome bronze clock when she heard him at work at the rear of the building.

She located the noise, and listened to it to try to learn what he was trying to do.

He was clearly not cutting or doing anything to the logs; but she finally discovered that he was digging under the sill, doubtless for the purpose of undermining the building and making his way through the floor.

But she felt as safe from that attempt as from any other that he made or might make, the floor being of the same material and quite as heavy and solid as the walls.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BELEAGUERED BIRD-CAGE.

MOLLIE watched and listened to the labor of her unseen enemy with interest, but without really fearing the result.

His task was evidently a difficult one, as he was doubtless poorly supplied with implements for digging, and the earth was stony.

She could easily hear his muttered oaths and ejaculations as he encountered some unusually obdurate obstruction.

Finally she perceived that he had succeeded in burrowing his way under the building, and

knew by his storm of bad language that he had found the fortress unassailable in that direction.

Finding himself foiled by the heavy timbers that formed the floor, he fell back upon threats, and hailed her fiercely.

"Hello, up there!"

"Hello, yourself!" she answered, as boldly and confidently as she could, doing her best to conceal the quaking of her heart and the trembling of her nerves.

"You had better open up, as I told you before. If you do, you won't be hurt. If you don't, I will set fire to this crib and burn it down."

"Try it, if you dare!"

She felt quite as defiantly as she spoke at the moment; but it was the courage of despair that prompted her bold speech.

It seemed to her that any fate would be preferable to that of falling into the hands of the wretch who had murdered Golo.

Thereafter she had another weary and painful period of waiting.

Again her body and mind were forced to suffer a fearful strain as she listened and watched for the crackling of flame and the smell of smoke; but she heard nothing of the kind, nor anything that might enable her to divine the intentions of her enemy.

She was so troubled that she was unable to eat, and hourly she felt herself growing weaker under the pressure of peril and anxiety.

When the day was drawing near its close she heard something fall against the side of the house near the edge of the roof.

By listening in that quarter she was able to guess pretty accurately, as she believed, the designs of her persistent persecutor.

He had probably used a hatchet that he found in the cabin to cut down a young tree, the limbs of which he had trimmed so that they would serve him as a ladder.

This ladder he had brought to the house, and had set it up against the wall, doubtless for the purpose of reaching the roof and making an attempt in that direction.

It would be easy enough to break through the roof; but Mollie still believed herself to be safe from intrusion, as the ceiling of the apartment was quite as heavy and solid as the walls and the floor.

When Gabe Cryder built that gilded cage for his pretty bird, he had made it a fortress that could withstand any ordinary method of assault.

The wretch soon climbed to the roof, and forced his way through the shingles and rafters, the nature and extent of his operations being easily judged by the noise he made.

Again he found himself foiled by heavy hewn timbers, and again his anger made itself manifest in oaths and execrations.

Again he tried the game of threatening to "burn the crib;" but Mollie Cryder no longer had any fear of his threats, as she had begun to believe that they were only meant to frighten her.

After storming about under the roof for a while, he abandoned that attempt, probably driven away by the darkness, as Mollie's clock told her that night must be near at hand.

The night was more terrible to her than the day had been.

Though her enemy gave no audible evidence of his presence, she had no reason to believe that he had left the premises or given up his purpose of getting inside of the house.

She tried to eat a little food, but had no taste for it, and it seemed to choke her.

There was nothing for her to do but to wait and watch, as long as her failing nature could endure the strain.

When her strength should give way there would be nothing for her to expect but death.

Even if she could be sure that her foe had taken himself off, or if she could get out of the house without fear of capture, it would be impossible for her to find her way to Jimtown in the darkness.

It would be as well to die where she was as anywhere else.

Besides, the chances were that he was resting in the cabin, so as to be near the door of her house.

For her part, she made a bit of a couch on the floor on her side of the wall, near the heavy door, but did not lie down upon it, as she was afraid that she might fall asleep and thus be surprised by her assailant.

So she crouched there and waited, wearied by the long and lonesome hours of night, but dreading the day for the new dangers it could bring.

At last her exhausted nature gave way, and she fell asleep, without intending to do so, and without being aware of the process.

It was a gradual sinking of her faculties that ended in stupor.

She was awakened by what appeared to be the distant report of a firearm.

As she started up, dazed and wondering, she heard another report, and recognized it as a rifle-shot.

Then she was almost sure that she heard steps as of some person running outside, and then was quite sure that she heard the trampling of horses.

What could it mean?

Was it possible that help as unexpected as welcome, was coming to her?

She started to rise, but discovered that it was with the greatest difficulty that she could get on her feet, and then she could only maintain herself in an upright position by leaning against the wall.

But her ears did not refuse their service, and her sense of hearing was unusually acute.

She heard the trampling of horses, and knew that they had stopped near the cabin.

Then she heard steps at the threshold and on the rough floor of the cabin, and then a voice, raised in horror and anguish.

"My God! Here is Golo, and he is dead!"

It was Gabe Cryder's voice, and she essayed to call to him, but found it impossible to speak above a whisper.

There was another voice, which she recognized as Henry Hinton's and then her father came to the door and called her in tender and anxious tones.

"Mollie! Are you alive, Mollie? Are you there?"

By a strenuous exertion she spoke distinctly at last, though not loudly, and he heard her.

"She is alive, Harry! Thank God for that! Can you open the door, girl?"

"I can slip the bars," she answered.

"Do it, then, and we will push in."

It was hard work, and it used up the remnant of her strength; but she succeeded in getting the heavy bars out of the way, and supported herself, trembling, against the wall.

The two men outside braced themselves against the log door, and it rolled inward, and the next moment the fainting girl fell into her father's arms.

It was no easy matter to revive her, and after she had come to her senses it was some time before she could gather sufficient strength to tell her story.

Then she told it in piecemeal, aided by a judicious use of stimulants.

In as few words as possible, interrupted by their exclamations of anger and sympathy, she put them in possession of the main facts of the affair.

Then they perceived that she stood in pressing need of something more substantial than sympathy and stimulants, and bestirred themselves in the preparation of a hot breakfast.

Hinton got some wood and built a fire, while the old man sought the provisions where he knew they were to be found, and then both of them divided their time between cooking and the comfort of Mollie.

As they busied themselves about these necessary affairs, they found time to talk and to pour forth the happiness that was overflowing their hearts.

"We saw that infernal scoundrel who has been pestering you, my dear," said the old man. "We caught sight of him as we rode out into the open. He seemed to have just stepped out of my cabin to take a squint at the mornin', and I thought at first that it was that long-legged hound who hailed from Pike's Peak."

"I was sure of it," remarked Hinton.

"So was I, as soon as he broke into that Injun loop of his. I hauled off and whanged at him with my rifle, and then Harry gave him a shot; but we both missed him, and only made him run like a scared wolf. Then we hurried into the cabin, and found poor Golo dead there."

"There seemed to be no hope for me," said Mollie, her strength and spirits reviving as she sipped her coffee. "I expected nothing less than death, as I could not look for help from any quarter. How was it, father, that you happened to come here in time to save me? Had you finished your business down there?"

"Not a bit of it. We had hardly begun to get at it. It was a dream that sent us here. The Lord be thanked for that dream! It was early yesterday morning, not long before day, when Harry woke me up and said that you were in danger, and were calling us."

A grateful glance from the girl made Henry Hinton proud of his ability as a dreamer.

"It was then that I did call you," said she. "I was in such terrible fear that I don't know what I said; but I suppose that I must have called both of you."

"And we came, my girl. Harry was so sure that you were in trouble, that he roused me up and started me off before I could hardly get my eyes open. And then we came as fast as our horses could carry us, and I am afraid that we have nearly killed the poor beasts."

"You must both be very tired as well as the horses," suggested Mollie.

"Sorter fagged out; but we will have plenty of chance to rest here. Nothin' to hurry us back. When we go, Mollie, we will take you with us. It won't do to leave you alone again, or to run any more risk. After we have put poor Golo under the ground we will shut up this house as tight as we can, and will all go down to Cranch's Gulch."

As they smoked their pipes after a refreshing meal, they talked over these and other matters; but the old man was evidently uneasy and restless, as if there was something on his mind.

"What is the matter with you, father?" asked

Mollie. "You speak and act as if you have some worry."

"So I have, my child. It is a good deal worse than worry. I have told you, with Harry's help, everything that happened down yonder, except one thing. That was something we saw when we first struck the Gulch, and I can't seem to get strength enough to go through it now. I reckon I will leave Harry to tell it to you, while I go and look after the horses."

It was a hard task that Old Gabe imposed upon his young friend; but it was best for all parties that he should have so delegated it, as no person could have told the story of the murder of young Gabe Cryder more tenderly and sympathetically than Henry Hinton did.

Mollie had recovered from the shock when her father returned, and he mingled his tears with hers.

CHAPTER XIV.

IS IT A CLEW?

THE burial of Golo was a sad event for Old Gabe and his daughter, but did not similarly affect Henry Hinton, who was not as well acquainted as they were with the good qualities of the deformed and half-witted giant.

But Hinton knew that the big fellow had been faithful to the last, and had died in the defense of his young mistress, and therefore the engineer gave him the respect and honor that were his due.

The two men gave themselves a good rest at Old Gabe's home, and then made preparations for their journey to Cranch's Gulch.

Hinton rejoiced greatly in the fact that Mollie Cryder was to be their companion during their journey and afterward.

Her father was also well pleased, as she would be reasonably safe with him and his young friend, and he would no longer feel the uneasiness which his absence from her had caused.

As his boy was dead, he naturally clung closer to his remaining child, and feared to lose her.

Besides Mollie's horse and their own, they took two pack-horses, well loaded with articles of necessity and comfort for their use at Cranch's Gulch.

On their way they stopped in at Jimtown to bid a liquid farewell to Jim Coates, who was asked if the stranger from Pike's Peak had been in that neighborhood lately.

He informed them that Bob Strahan had called in at Jimtown a few days before, but had not since been visible there.

Their journey downward was slower and easier than the up trip had been, and they reached their destination in good time and good condition.

As the old man had no idea of housing Mollie in the shelter which they had erected down the valley, they took up their abode in one of the deserted tenements at Cranch's Gulch.

For this purpose they selected one which was out of sight of the cabin in which young Gabe Cryder was murdered, though not far distant from it.

Though it was badly dilapidated, they soon by their joint exertions put it in fair order, and made it reasonably comfortable.

Its decayed and vine-covered exterior was highly attractive to Mollie Cryder, who was also greatly pleased with the valley, and glad to be let loose from her gilded cage.

When they were ready to renew their search for the silver, they went down to their shelter cabin, taking Mollie with them.

The arrangement was that they should leave her in the shelter cabin while they prosecuted the search; but she soon upset all that by insisting upon accompanying them, declaring that under no circumstances must she be left alone.

Of course they yielded to her wish, and she assisted in the search without hindering it to any great extent.

As the two men were separated during most of the tramps, it somehow happened that the girl was most frequently associated with the young engineer, and it is reasonable to suppose that the association was pleasurable to each of them.

The first morning of the search brought no satisfactory results, and at noon the three returned to the cabin to prepare and eat their dinner.

There they found a stranger with the appearance of a ranchman, who was evidently waiting for them, and who looked at them curiously as they descended the hill and crossed the valley.

He was of course welcomed, and at once made himself at home among them, giving his name as George Dean, assisting in the preparation of the dinner, and expressing his satisfaction at having met them and being permitted to share their meal.

"What were you doin' on that hill, anyhow?" he asked his new friends. "I don't want to be inquisitive; but I've been here afore, you see, and it looks queer to me that anybody should be prowlin' about up thar."

"What's the matter with the place?" replied Old Gabe, ignoring the question of the stranger.

"Nothin' so mortal bad, I reckon; but Dead Man's Tree has got a bad name, and the hill

is no good at all. I allowed that you might be tryin' to do somethin' in the prospectin' way up yonder."

"That is what we were lookin' about for," remarked the old man. "It seems as if there ought to be somethin' somewhere about Cranch's Gulch."

"That is jest the notion that's fooled so many, and the sooner you get it out of your head the better for you. I was one of the durned blunderheads who came here with the rush; and I wasted so much time and money here that it makes me mad to think of it. I've prospected over every foot of ground, I may say, all about here, and the more I looked the less I found. Thar couldn't be a poorer place to prospect than the side hill yonder, though thar was an old miner named Jim Mertz who put consid'able time into it."

At this name Old Gabe pricked up his ears, and Henry Hinton also listened attentively.

The old man had said that the friend he met on the cars was named "Merritts, or Merts, or something like it," and it was sure that his given name was Jim.

"Jim Mertz was a bit cranky, I reckon," continued George Dean. "Leastways, we all thought so, and the prospectin' over thar was the foolishhest thing we'd known him to do. He gave it up arter a while, though, and said that the only thing he had found was the wu'st den o' rattlesnakes he'd ever struck. We were goin' to make up a party for a snake-hunt; but Jim persuaded us out of that notion. The rattlers were so well fixed, he said, right in the heart of the rock, that they'd be bound to git the best of us."

"What became of him?" inquired Old Gabe.

"What became o' Jim? Why, I believe he went East. Said he was tired of minin' and prospectin' an' livin' hard and gittin' nothin' out of it. So he allowed that he'd go back to his folks and hunt a poor-house thar. For my part, I took to ranchin', and I mean to stick to it. It's a livin', anyhow, and a tol'able easy and decent sort of a life."

After dinner George Dean took a friendly leave of his entertainers, and rode away up the valley.

Old Gabe then became so downcast and disconsolate, that his young friend asked him what was the matter.

"I'm about ready to give it up," he answered. "It's pretty certain now that the man I met on the train was tryin' to fool me, or was a case for a crazy-house. It's most likely that he was loony, as George Dean told us that he was looked on as cranky here, and that sort o' thing would be apt to grow on him."

"Some of those who are called cranks are the smartest men among us," suggested Hinton.

"Maybe so; but that Jim Mertz was clear off, if he wasn't lyin' as hard as a mule can kick. Come to think of it, it was kinder suspicious, the way he jumped at my offer so quick."

Hinton observed that he failed to see it in that light.

"How can you help it, my boy? Didn't you hear what Dean told us? He said that Jim Mertz had prospected all over that hillside, and all he found was the worst den of rattlesnakes he ever struck. He was so completely disgusted that he said he was goin' home to hunt a poor-house."

"It seems to me," remarked the engineer, speaking slowly and thoughtfully, "that our friend who stayed to dinner has given us just the clew we want."

"Just the clew we want? Land o' Goshen! What do you mean, Harry? Have you gone crazy, too?"

"I will tell you what I mean, Uncle Gabe, and I wish you would think a bit as you listen. Jim Mertz was an old miner and prospector, and he was not likely to put in his time on that hillside unless he had good reason to believe that there was something to be found there. If there was anything, he found it. If he found it, of course he meant to do the best he could to keep the find to himself, and what could be simpler or more to the purpose than to publish the fact that he had found nothing but a rattlesnakes' den?"

"That does sound kinder reasonable," remarked the old man.

"That is not all, Uncle Gabe. He would be more likely to tell the prying and spying people who were here then that he was going East to hunt a poor-house, than to make known the fact that he was going to hunt money to develop his find. When he was on that errand he met you, and he naturally jumped at your offer, because he was in a hurry to get at the silver, and because he strongly objected to going home poor. He would have been a fool to go on to Ohio, when he could get what he wanted right at hand."

"That sounds as if it might be true, Harry."

"He was so glad to get hold of you, Uncle Gabe, that he was freer in his speech, no doubt, than he meant to be. He told you that the silver was near Dead Man's Tree, and in a most unlikely place. So was the rattlesnakes' den—not an unlikely place for snakes, perhaps, but an unlikely place for men to get at. But he deemed it proper to warn the people here away

from it. The rattlesnakes' den was in the heart of the rock, he said, and it is there that we must look for the silver."

"What do you mean by the heart of the rock, my boy?"

"There must be some sort of a hole somewhere in the rock, such as is easy to overlook and hard to get at."

"It seems, then, that we must go poking our heads into all sorts of holes in the rock, and that we must hunt the silver by hunting rattlesnakes."

"My belief is, Mr. Cryder, that when we find the hole we want, there will be no rattlesnakes in it worth mentioning, but the silver will be there."

"Then we will go and hunt that hole."

CHAPTER XV.

THE SEARCH FOR THE SILVER.

MOLLIE CRYDER went with them, of course.

She declared that she had no fancy for hunting rattlesnakes; but she had become imbued with a portion of Henry Hinton's enthusiasm, and was eager to help hunt the hole.

The young engineer had by this time argued himself into a state of certainty, and was sanguine in the belief that the silver would be found.

But, when they again gathered about Dead Man's Tree, he was obliged to admit that he was as much at a loss as ever.

He was sure that there was a hole somewhere, but where was it?

All the visible holes, and all portions of the rocks which they had examined, were equally unlikely, and there was no real clew to guide them to the right place.

In his perplexity he fell back on Jim Mertz's crumpled bit of paper, seating himself on a stone near the dead tree, and poring over the hieroglyphics in the hope of extracting some meaning from them.

"Here," he said, "seems to be Dead Man's Tree. At least, that is what we must take it to be, and it means that if it means anything. The tree, then, is our starting point. It is quite likely that the X's after it stand for tens, and that six of them may mean sixty feet, or sixty paces, or sixty rods, or sixty measures of distance of some kind. But we don't happen to know what the measure is, or in what direction the distance is to be measured. And there we are again."

Mollie Cryder, who had examined the paper with Hinton more than once before, was standing behind him, looking down over his shoulder.

She looked up as he finished speaking, and uttered a little exclamation of surprise.

"I see the Indian's head," said she.

"Of course you do," answered Henry a little gruffly. "It is easy enough to see that. I have seen it so often that I am tired of looking at it. I wish you could tell me what it means."

"Don't get cross, Henry, or I may refuse to tell you. I don't mean to say that I see the head on the paper there."

"Where do you see it, then? In your mind's eye?"

"Better than that. Right before my two eyes. On the rocks yonder. Open your eyes and look at it. I am sure it is plain enough."

Hinton jumped up, and looked as she pointed. He then saw the head she spoke of, and, as she told him, it was plain enough.

A piece of the craggy rock that formed the upper side of the ledge that has been mentioned had exactly the appearance, form and position which they then occupied, of the head on the paper.

It required scarcely any effort of the imagination to see there an Indian's head with the head-dress complete.

Henry Hinton, who was highly excited by this unexpected and interesting development shouted to Old Gabe, who was walking about aimlessly.

The old man hastened to them, and recognized the Indian's head as soon as it was pointed out to him.

"That begins to look something like business," said he. "It is wonderful. How does it happen that we have never seen it before?"

"We would never have seen it now if it hadn't been for Mollie," answered his young friend. "It was she whose sharp eyes found it out just now."

"But it is so plain that it is strange we never saw it before."

Further investigation revealed the fact that the head was only visible from the exact position which they then occupied at the foot of Dead Man's Tree.

At the distance of only a few feet to the right or the left the outlines of the rock changed to the view, so that they did not bear the faintest resemblance to an Indian's head.

As the two men searchers had probably never before stood in exactly the same position, facing in the same direction, they had failed to see the remarkable image.

"Thank Mollie for that, Uncle Gabe!" exclaimed Hinton. "It is she who has found the silver for us."

"Yes, it is found. But we ain't out of the woods yet, my boy. That is another landmark,

I reckon; but I don't see how it can be anything more than that."

"Just wait till I try the X's on it. If they come out right, it may lead to something further."

The young man, followed by his friends, stepped off sixty paces toward the Indian's head, and they brought him to the foot of the crag that formed the image.

"We understand it well enough now," he said. "Six X's stand for sixty paces, and from this point we must step off forty paces more to reach the silver. To be sure, we don't know in what direction to step."

This was an important point, and it received the serious consideration of all three.

But they considered it hopefully, as they then had good reason to believe that they were advancing toward a solution of the problem.

It was clear that the required forty steps could not be taken in the direction marked out by the sixty steps, as it would be impossible to walk through solid rock.

It was equally unlikely that the steps were to be taken by turning and walking down the hill which they had ascended.

Consequently the distance could only be measured off along the ledge, which ran for a little way in an easterly and westerly direction, one end being marked by a wall of rock, and the other by what may be called a jumping-off place.

This line of measurement was chosen for the good reason that there was no other line to choose.

Blessed are they who are reduced to an extremity, as they then know exactly where they are, and need be bothered by no doubts.

It was unpromising enough, to be sure.

As the old man observed, they were between the devil and the deep sea, and might jump off or be gobbled up, just as they pleased.

Hinton took the westerly direction first, and stepped off his forty paces.

They brought him exactly to the foot of the wall of rock which shut off the ledge at that end.

It rose to the height of thirty feet or more above the level of the ledge, and was bare and perpendicular—just a plain wall of rock, with nothing apparently behind it but some jutting crags.

"You are up a stump now, my boy," remarked Old Gabe. "I reckon we will have to go back and try the other way."

"Not until I am through with this one," replied Hinton.

"Are you going to bore through it?"

"No; but I am going to climb over it. There is nothing like trying, and I want you to oblige me in this, Uncle Gabe. The forty paces brought me to the foot of this rock, just as the sixty paces brought me to the Indian's head, and I can't help believing that they mean something. Lend a hand, now, and help me get up there."

They cut a young tree, as Bob Strahan had done when he climbed to the roof of Mollie Cryder's house, and trimmed off the branches so as to make a ladder of it, which they placed against the wall of rock.

Hinton mounted the ladder, reached the top of the wall of rock, and disappeared for a moment.

Directly he uttered a yell of delight and triumph, and showed himself at the edge again.

"It's all right!" he shouted. "Here it is! This is the place!"

The tough old Mountain Tramp fairly trembled with excitement, and for some seconds could not trust himself to speak or move.

Then he hastily climbed the ladder, which was held by Mollie at the bottom and by Hinton at the top, and his young friend gave him a hand and helped him off upon the rock.

He saw something there that filled him with joy and wonder.

It was a most singular natural formation and doubtless volcanic in its origin.

There was a hole in the rocks, the bottom of which, covered with earth and gravel and a slight growth of grass and bushes, was about on a level with the ledge from which they had climbed.

In shape it was an irregular oval, and in size perhaps twenty yards by thirty, measuring it at its greatest dimensions.

Its walls were mostly perpendicular, the side opposite to that from which the searchers observed it rising up to a series of crags that were quite mountainous.

Yet that side was apparently easier of access than the other, as there seemed to be an opening in the rocks which might afford an entrance in that direction.

But the searchers were not in the mood at that moment for attempting to discover any roundabout route.

They quickly decided that they would haul up their ladder, let it down into the holes, and satisfy themselves concerning the silver.

When they returned to the other side of the ledge for that purpose, they were hailed by Mollie, who was anxious to know what they had found.

"We have found the hole," answered Hinton,

"and now we are going down in it. As soon as we find anything more we will let you know."

It was quite a tug to pull up their ladder; but hope is a great help to labor, and they soon had the tree lowered into the hole.

Hinton insisted that he should go down alone, leaving the old man on the ridge to carry the news to Mollie, whatever it might be.

"But there may be a den of rattles down there, my boy," suggested Old Gabe.

"They had better keep out of my way, then. I can't allow them to interfere with this business."

The young engineer hastily climbed down in the hole, but did not fail to keep an eye out for snakes when he reached the bottom.

It was then late in the afternoon, and it was pretty dark down there; but his eyes were sharp and he made good use of them as he looked about for indications of silver, while Gabe Cryder watched him eagerly from above.

Near the high rock on the other side he picked up a chunk which attracted him, and examined it by the light of a match that he struck.

"What is it, Harry?" anxiously inquired the old man.

The young engineer made no answer, but struck more matches as he carefully examined the face of the rock.

Then he dropped the chunk into his pocket, and ran to the foot of the ladder.

"It's all right!" he shouted. "The silver is here, and there is plenty of it. I have found the vein in the rock, and it is a big one. I will bring up a chunk that has dropped off."

Gabe Cryder hurried to the other side of the ridge to tell the pleasing news to Mollie, while Hinton climbed up out of the hole.

He showed the chunk which he had brought up, and it proved to be almost exactly similar to that which Old Gabe had got from Jim Mertz.

As it was not worth while at that hour to attempt to make any further discoveries, they hauled up the ladder, climbed down to the ledge, and returned to their home in Cranch's Gulch to rejoice and lay plans.

CHAPTER XVI.

A CRAZY CAPITALIST.

SHORTLY before the return of Gabe Cryder with his daughter and his friend, there was an arrival at Cranch's Gulch of a new inhabitant.

It was a woman, the arrival was, and she will be easily recognized when it is stated that she was small and thin, with restless eyes, with a hideous scar on one side of her face, and dressed in worn clothing that had once been fine.

She came with a cart that was drawn by an Indian pony, and during her journey she had walked by the pony's side quite as much as she had ridden behind him in the cart.

On her arrival at the Gulch she hitched the pony, and began an inspection of the deserted tenements that freely offered themselves for her occupation.

Among the buildings, more or less dilapidated, which she entered and examined, was that in which the body of young Gabe Cryder had been found by his father and Henry Hinton.

Before she reached it she came across a grave, which she looked at curiously.

"Don't know what G. C. stands for," she said, as she inspected the head-board. "But it's a new grave, that's certain. Somebody has been here lately, and somebody has died here. Maybe he was killed. I had better look out for myself, and for my money, too. But I guess I'm good enough for that."

She went to the cabin, opened the door, and looked in.

Immediately she began to sniff, as if she smelt something offensive or peculiar.

She stepped inside, and saw the blood-stains on the floor.

"Thought I smelt something," she muttered. "So I did—that's certain. Blood, too. That accounts for the grave out there. It smells like him, and it looks like him. He must have been here, playing one of his games, sweet boy. But that can't be, either, because he wouldn't have buried the man he killed. That ain't a bit like him. He never tried to bury me, though I guess he would have been glad to know that I was buried. I can put this and that together as well as the next woman. Anybody who says that I am crazy is a fool. I won't move into this house."

She finally chose a tenement on the other side of the Gulch, opposite to that which she had visited, and but a little distance from it.

"I don't know whether he will come here again or not," she said. "It ain't like him to go to the same place twice. But the dead man may bring him back, and I will stay here and watch for him."

She brought the pony and cart to the cabin, and proceeded to take possession.

The cart contained about as small and poor a collection of necessary articles as it would be possible for a woman to begin housekeeping with.

Such as they were, they were not relics of the wreck of the hovel near Jimtown, but were second-hand articles which she had picked up in some town.

There were a few blankets, a few cooking utensils, a box of provisions, a small box containing her shabby clothing, and a few odds and ends.

The sachel which she had held in her hand at the time of the explosion was still carried in her hand, and the first thing she did was to find a hiding-place for it inside of the cabin, and to deposit it there.

Then she found a quiet and retired spot, a grassy valley out of sight of the Gulch tenements, where she tethered her pony with a long line, so that he could have good grazing-ground.

Her house was soon furnished, and one of her most prized possessions was a new broom, with which she made it as clean as possible.

Thus her solitary housekeeping at Cranch's Gulch was begun.

When Gabe Cryder returned with his companions, she watched them eagerly and anxiously, but without allowing herself to be seen.

"I know the old man," she said to her solitary self. "He is a good man, too. I don't know the others; but they look like nice people, and that is a sweet girl, something like a girl I once knew, named Alice Marden. Wonder if they have come to stay."

She watched them in a stealthy manner of her own, and finally saw them select and move into a cabin further down the Gulch, out of sight of the building which she had first visited.

As that was much the best of the Gulch tenements, it was surprising that such nice people should have given it the go-by.

"They seem to be afraid of that house," said the little woman. "Perhaps they are afraid of him. But I ain't afraid of him, and I guess I had better look after them and take care of them."

She returned to her own cabin, and swept it again, arranging her few belongings so as to give it as neat an appearance as possible.

"I must call on them, as they are new-comers," she said. "But I had better wait until they get settled. Maybe they've got some more furniture to come, and she won't want to see me until she can show me her things."

Though she held off from visiting them with this laudable purpose, she did not fail to take a deep but secret interest in their affairs.

It might have been because she had nothing to do, outside of the easy task of caring for herself and her pony; or it might have been a natural manifestation of the friendly interest which she had previously expressed to herself.

When they went down the valley to search for the silver, she followed them, carefully keeping herself out of their sight, and anxiously watched all their movements as closely as she could.

"I wonder what they are after," she said. "Looking for something, of course. It must be money, and I hope they'll find it."

When they returned to their cabin to rejoice and lay plans, after the discovery of Jim Mertz's hole in the rocks and its silver deposit, she crept to the outside of the tenement, and listened intently to all they were saying.

When she had heard enough to satisfy her, she ran to her own cabin, disinterred her leather sachel, and hastened back.

Gabe Cryder and Henry Hinton were then discussing the cost of opening the mine, counting up the money they had and could raise, and considering the quickest way of getting hold of it and putting it to use.

"It won't be enough, at the best," remarked the old man, "and it will be hard on us to let other people in it at an early stage of the game; but machinery and labor will cost a pile."

"We will have enough to make a start, though," observed Hinton. "We must go to Denver, as you suggested, or I must go to make arrangements for getting my money. Then I will get some of this ore assayed, and it will be easy enough to get up a stock company if we have to do that."

"But we won't do it, my boy, until necessity compels us to."

The door opened as Old Gabe spoke, and in walked the queer little woman who had been watching the party.

The old man recognized her at once. "Crazy Kate!" he exclaimed in astonishment.

Without a word she stepped to the rude table at which they were seated, opened her sachel, and poured forth a large amount of money in notes and gold.

The pile made such a show on the table that the three occupants of the cabin opened their eyes in amazement.

Old Gabe was overcome with wonder, not only because he could not have expected her to have so much wealth in her possession, but because he could not imagine what she meant by pouring it out on the table there.

She proceeded to explain her action after a fashion of her own.

"There it is," she said. "There ought to be eight thousand dollars of it, and I guess it's all there. It was ten thousand dollars that uncle John left me after I was killed; but I have spent about two thousand of it in getting cured, in law, in traveling about, and one way and another."

Henry Hinton was the only one who retained sufficient presence of mind to offer the visitor a seat.

She bowed as she took it, and sat there and waited for a reply.

"I don't understand you," said the old man, as soon as he could trust himself to speak.

"Why do you bring all that money here? and why do you load it on that table?"

"To put it into the mine, of course," she calmly answered.

This was another stunner.

What could the crazy woman know about the mine and its need of money?

"What mine?" inquired Old Gabe.

"Your mine, of course. The silver mine you found down yonder to-day, Jim Mertz's mine, you know. I have been waiting a long time for this chance, and now I want you to take my money and give me a share in the mine. That's all. It's simple enough."

All this was too much for Gabe Cryder, who could do nothing but stare at his strange visitor.

As he was manifestly incapable of conducting the inquiry any further, Henry Hinton took up the task.

"Please tell us something about yourself," said the engineer—"who you are, where you came from, and what you know about the mine you speak of."

"Now, young man," she answered, shaking her finger at him, "don't you go to make a lawyer of yourself and cross-examine the witness too sharply. And if I should say anything that sounds queer to you, don't get the notion into your handsome head that I am crazy. All people don't look at the same things in the same way. Anybody who says that I am crazy is a fool. The old man there knows who I am and where I came from. Don't you, Uncle Gabe?"

Uncle Gabe gasped an affirmative reply.

"And this money is all mine, and I want to put it in safe hands and in a good business. Not that I am really afraid of him; but it is a good deal of bother to carry it around, and he has been after it."

"Who is he?" asked Henry.

"The man who killed me, you know. He found his way up to my place near Jimtown, and, of course, he came after the money. But I was ready for him, and I lighted the fuse and blew up the whole outfit. Of course, you heard of that."

"Never a word," answered Gabe Cryder.

"That's queer. It must have been in all the papers. But he crawled out of the ruins, and did not even seem to be singed. I suppose he will come after the money again, and I want to put it into that mine."

"But what do you know about the mine?" demanded the engineer.

"Don't ask too many questions, young man, as I told you before. I know about it, and that's enough. I was here before you came, and I don't have eyes and ears for nothing. I want you to understand that I am a business woman, and that I know what I am doing. So all you have to do is to count the money, and give me the right kind of a receipt for it, unless you don't want me to have any sort of a share in the mine."

This was such an amazing proposition, though by no means an alarming one, that the two partners naturally demurred and wanted to discuss it.

Not because they were unwilling to use the money and give her the share she asked for, but because they were afraid of doing something that might look like taking an advantage of a woman who was not altogether sound mentally.

But she insisted, and advanced a further argument.

"If you don't take it," she said, "he will come after it again, and will be sure to get it in one way or another. I suppose he will try to get it when you have it, too; but the three of us will be too many for him, I hope."

It was finally settled that they should take the money, admit her as a partner in the enterprise, and abandon the idea of forming a stock company.

They counted the contents of the sachel, and Henry Hinton proceeded to draw the receipt.

"What is your name?" he asked the new partner.

"Alice Marden."

"Why did father call you Crazy Kate?" demanded Mollie Cryder, who had approached the stranger and began to take a warm feminine interest in her.

"Because it is my name, my dear. The other is my legal name—and we have to be legal, you know. Alice Marden is dead—she was killed—and I hope, my dear, that you will call me Crazy Kate—or anything but that other name."

After the business transaction was completed, she accepted an invitation from her partners to stay and partake of their evening meal, and when she left for her own cabin she invited them to visit her, and was evidently pleased in putting on the airs of an old resident of Cranch's Gulch.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CUT-THROAT KINGDOM.

AARON BLUMENSTEIN, as his name indicates, was a Jew by birth and by religious belief—that is, if he may be supposed to have had any religious belief.

If he had any, it must have been lying dormant, or have been held subordinate to his desire for the acquisition of property.

He was more than a Jew in the fact that he did not care how he came by property, unless he may be said to have grown to have a preference for foul means over those that were fair.

Thus it was that his place at a little distance from Trailton had become known as a resort and a refuge for the scamps and desperadoes of the region, among whom it was notorious as Sheeny Aaron's.

It was nominally a hotel, but really a bar-room, with scant accommodation for man and beast outside of its liquid refreshments, and those were of the vilest and most poisonous products of the still.

Being outside of usual routes of travel, as well as away from the town and its jurisdiction, it occupied an independent position of its own, and there were law-abiding people who were in the habit of speaking of it as Cut-throat Kingdom.

One warm and cloudy spring day the hostelry of Sheeny Aaron was more than usually well filled with regular and casual customers.

There were about a dozen present, all rough-looking men, and some of such villainous aspect that a traveler would have disliked to meet one of them on the road, even at midday.

They were as a party moody and depressed, partly because the day was soft and muggy, threatening rain, and not calculated to inspire them.

Partly, and perhaps chiefly, because most of them had not the wherewith to cause a flow of spirits from the bar, and Aaron was constitutionally averse to the credit system.

A muddy horse ambled up to the hostelry, and the spattered rider dismounted and entered the bar-room.

He was a tall, gaunt and broad-shouldered man, dark, and of a forbidding countenance, and he was at once recognized and hailed as Bob Strahan.

A scowl was his only notice of the recognition as he walked to the bar.

"Give me some sop," was his gruff order.

Aaron set out a bottle and a glass, and he filled the glass to the brim and flung it inside of himself.

"More sop," he ordered, and twice more he replenished and emptied the glass.

The fiery liquor seemed to fill an aching void, and there was a satisfied expression on his evil countenance as he turned and faced the assemblage.

"Are you doin' your drinkin' alone nowadays, Bob?" inquired a hard-looking customer who was known as Muley Mike.

"You bet I am, these days. Charity begins at home, and I am lucky to be able to squeeze out enough to pay for my own sop."

He filled and lighted a pipe, and sat down with the others.

"I don't know but you are right about that, Bob," said Muley Mike. "These are the hardest times I ever struck, and I don't see what a poor man is going to do for a livin'. No money goin' about on foot, or tied up in anythin' a feller can git hold of. Chances are that if any of us should bust a bank or hold up a stage, we wouldn't git enough to pay for the wear and worry of the job. I'm gittin' afeard that some of us will have to turn in and go to work at suthin', if it's only for grub."

"Tain't so easy to find work either," observed a stalwart cowboy. "I've been tryin' all over this range to git a job at tendin' cattle, but couldn't strike a dollar."

"Cattle are too durn well 'tended as it is," growled Bob Strahan. "Never a hoof loose on the range anywhere, and the cusses who claim to own them hold onto them as if they were gold."

"Don't talk about gold," broke in Omaha Pete. "Thar ain't no sech thing any more. All the diggin's are used up, and all the silver mines have petered out, and no new strikes comin' in."

"Dose times vash mighty hardt," mournfully remarked Sheeny Aaron.

"I ain't so sure about silver," said Muley Mike. "That business may brisk up ag'in. I'm jest from Denver, whar I heard of a big strike out on the divide, and whar do you guess it was?"

They all gave it up.

"At Cranch's Gulch."

A general chorus of dissent followed this statement.

Those present who had not been in the rush to Cranch's Gulch had heard of that locality, which had been so unanimously voted n. g. for mining purposes, and they hooted at the idea that anything of value could have been found there.

"That can't be a fact, Mike," said Bob Strahan. "Some mining sharp has been trying to run a rig on the greenies."

"It seems to be a solid fact, though. A young chap was in Denver hirin' hands and buyin' tools and things, and he wasn't puffin' the strike up a bit, either. It was only by a slant that I got onto it. The young chap's name was Henry Hinton."

At the mention of this name Strahan evinced a lively interest in the report, inquiring for further particulars of the strike.

"The young chap is from the East, and is new here," continued Muley Mike. "But he's got a partner, one of the oldest settlers on the divide. We all know him, I reckon. It's Old Gabe, who hangs out near Jintown."

"I know both of them," said Bob Strahan with an oath. "I've got a grudge against them, too. Say, boys, if the strike turns out to amount to anything, there'll be a good chance for us to put some fine work in. Cranch's Gulch ain't an easy place to get the stuff away from, and there's sure to be plenty of openings for our sort of talent and enterprise."

"Would we lay for the stuff as it came out, or jump the claim?" asked Muley Mike.

"Either or both, whichever promised to be the easiest work and the best pay. Of course we will have to be on the spot to decide, and we can pick up jobs there, or put them up. What do you say, boys? Will you go in with me to make a big haul at Cranch's Gulch? Since I heard the names I believe with Mike that the strike must amount to something, and I know that you are all hungry. What do you say? Are you in?"

A general chorus of assent followed this query.

"Every man of you?"

Bob Strahan jumped up in his excitement, and gazed eagerly at the assemblage.

His glance rested finally on a man who sat a little apart from the others, who had not joined in the general chorus of assent, and who did not seem to be disposed at that moment to commit himself by speech.

This person was so quiet and unobtrusive that hitherto he had attracted no attention; but he received it in full measure when Bob Strahan began to stare at him.

He was a man of muscular appearance, though not heavily built, of medium height and under middle age, with sandy hair, auburn beard, and a florid complexion.

His attire was the orthodox cowboy rig, a little exaggerated as to ornaments and appendages, and of suspicious newness.

A large slouch hat partly concealed his features, and two formidable revolvers were stuck in his belt.

"Seems to me that I didn't hear you speak," said Strahan, as he scowled at the stranger.

"Perhaps it was because I didn't speak," replied the other.

"It is high time that you were speaking, then. We are talking business here, and are particular about who hears us."

"I supposed that this was a public house."

"It ain't public enough to harbor spies, I can tell you. Are you one of Pinkerton's men? or what's your style? Speak up, before we jump onto you. Who are you? and what are you here for?"

"I don't see that I am in any way bound to tell you my name or my business," coolly answered the stranger.

"You don't, hey? We'll see about that. Boys, do any of you know this wolf?"

There was no affirmative answer.

The man was unquestionably a stranger.

"He's a spy!" shouted Strahan. "Shut the door there, Mike! We'll squeeze the truth out of him, or settle his case mighty sudden."

As Muley Mike flew to obey this order, Bob Strahan dropped his hand upon the butt of his pistol.

But there was a rapid change of scene before he drew it.

The stranger jumped up from his chair, and his actions were as quick as the lightning's flashes.

He seized the tall man by the shoulders, and threw him violently among the others, causing a general upsetting and discomfiture.

Then he bounded to the open window at the side of the building, which nobody thought of guarding.

He must have anticipated such an attempt to seize him as had occurred, as his horse was standing right at the window, unhitched, and with the bridle-rein thrown over the saddle-bow.

He stepped upon the window sill, and the next instant he was on the back of his horse.

A word, and a touch of the spur, and away he sped at a furious gait.

Bob Strahan, recovering quickly from his violent and unexpected tumble, rushed to the window, and fired an ineffective shot after the fugitive.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GHOST OF CRANCH'S GULCH.

AFTER the abrupt departure of the stranger there was silence for a while in the hostelry of Sheeny Aaron.

Not exactly a silence, but muttered oaths and ejaculations, though there was nothing that could be called speech.

The hush, such as it was, was one of amazement and consternation.

It was the general impression of the party that something had happened that might harm them as a body, and which they had cause to regret.

Bob Strahan was the first to express himself intelligibly and coherently.

He had been quite silent, seeming to be absorbed in reflection, his brows drawn down, and his lips tightly pressed together, when he burst out with a volley of terrific oaths.

"I know him now!" he shouted when he had thus relieved his mind. "I thought I had seen him before, and now I've got him down fine. Oh, if I had only guessed it sooner, so that I could have shot him as he sat there!"

"Who is he?" demanded Muley Mike.

"Sam Slevin, who was marshal at Central City."

"Silver Sam!" exclaimed the chorus.

"That's the man, and he's a holy terror, if ever there lived one. I've been in his clutches, and ought to know him. You ought to know him, too, Mike. It was his cussed pink whiskers that fooled me, and I know him by his back better than his front."

"But Silver Sam ain't much in the habit of showing his back to folks," remarked Omaha Pete.

What was he there for? was the general inquiry.

"He must be lookin' for somebody," suggested Muley Mike, "and it's likely to be one of us. But who is it, and what for?"

"Overhaul your records, my friends," replied Strahan, "and judge whether you have done anything that you ought to be sorry for. Then you may be thankful that he hasn't got you yet. But it's an infernal shame that Aaron should let a stranger like that in here, and, worse than all, that he should let us go on and talk business before a spy without giving us a hint."

Aaron defended himself stoutly, declaring that his customers must have known of the presence of a stranger quite as well as he did, if not better, and that it was their duty to be careful when and before whom they talked of their affairs.

It was finally settled that they could not guess what had brought Silver Sam among them, but that no harm had come of his presence, as far as they could see.

They had merely talked of a possible project, without committing themselves to anything.

"All the same, boys," said Bob Strahan, "we will look after that silver strike, and will hit it hard if it comes to anything. One of us must go down to Cranch's Gulch and watch it."

Confidence and good feeling being thus re-established, Sheeny Aaron invited the party to poison themselves at his expense.

"Dot Cranch's Goolsh," he said, as he set out the glasses, "vash der blace vot dat queer leedle voo-man wanted to go by, der oder day."

"What woman?" was the inquiry.

"Von leedle voman, mit one leedle cart, oont von leedle pony. She behaved to herself like she vash crazy."

Bob Strahan took an immediate interest in this piece of information, and continued to question the landlord until he brought out all the particulars.

It had happened over a week ago, the landlord explained, and he might not have thought of it again but for the mention of the name of Cranch's Gulch.

He could hardly say whether the woman was young or old, as she had such a strange appearance.

She was dressed in rusty black garments, and on her faded cheek was a great scar that looked actually hideous.

She drove a little pony attached to a little cart which was loaded with a small amount of household goods, and her words and manner were such as to induce the belief that she was not altogether in her right mind.

When she stopped at the Cut-throat Kingdom, she got some food, inquired the way to Cranch's Gulch, and flew into a rage at the mention of whisky.

The only other noticeable thing about her was a small leather sachel, apparently well filled, which she always carried, never allowing it to leave her hand.

"Boys," said Bob Strahan, "I will be the one to go to Cranch's Gulch and watch the silver strike. I don't like the durned hole, and would rather keep away from it; but I've got something else to look after there, and I believe that I can attend to that silver business better than any of the rest of you."

It was agreed that he should go, and the next morning he mounted his horse and set out for Cranch's Gulch.

He reached the Gulch at night, as he intended to, his business there not being such as would induce him to court observation and publicity.

He rode down by the valley, passing a few of the deserted tenements, and tethered his horse within sight and easy reach of the building in which Old Gabe had found the body of his murdered son.

Cautiously and slowly he approached that

building, starting at every sound, and even stopping to shudder at the whirr of a night bird, as if he suspected the presence of concealed enemies.

"It's the best house there is," he muttered, "and she may have settled in it, though I reckon she ain't likely to choose the best. But there's no accounting for crazy folks. If she isn't there, maybe some of the silver men have taken up with it, and I shall want to know just where to find them."

As he drew near the dark and silent building, he stumbled over a small mound of earth.

With a muttered oath he rose and looked at it, perceiving that it was long and narrow, with a bit of board planted at one end.

At once he knew it for a grave, and shuddered at the sight of it, biting his lips, and frowning heavily.

Conquering his repugnance, he knelt down and examined it more closely, feeling of the earth, and striking a match so that he might decipher the inscription on the head-board.

"Somebody has found a dead man and buried him here," he said, as he rose to his feet again. "Somebody who knew him, too. I would give a small fortune, if I had it to know what G. C. stands for. I begin to wish that I hadn't come here. But I am sure that she carries that money about with her, and I must find her and get hold of it."

Cautiously and slowly as before he walked toward the deserted house until he reached it.

The single shutter was hanging out, and he forced himself to look in at the opening.

All was dark and silent inside.

He stepped around to the door, which easily yielded to his touch, and he opened it without entering.

There was not the faintest sign of life or occupation within.

"None of them here," he muttered, not in a tone of disappointment, but with a long breath of relief.

"None of them here, and yet a man would suppose that anybody who came to settle in Cranch's Gulch would be sure to pick out this house.

"I am glad that they haven't, though. I don't fancy it for any sort of business.

"If she is here, I must find her. That is the first thing, and I will begin at the top and look on down."

He returned to the head of the valley, or to the first house that was to be met after entering the valley, and searched the dilapidated tenements in succession as he reached them.

All were equally deserted and empty—no sign of human life or occupation in any of them.

His search finally brought him down to the neighborhood of the house which he had first visited, but on the other side of the Gulch.

"Curse it!" he savagely exclaimed. "Everything seems to bring me back to this place, and I will bet my right hand that I won't get by it this night. If I should, something would be sure to bring me back to it."

Opposite to the house which he dreaded was a small and low cabin, which he next proceeded to examine.

It was dark and silent, as the others were, and apparently deserted as they were; yet there was about it some intangible and invisible evidence—perhaps a feeling—of occupancy.

His eyes, moreover, accustomed to darkness and to hidden ways, had already descried a faint but visible footpath leading to the door.

"This is the place," he muttered. "Somebody is living here, anyhow, and it is just such a shebang as *she* would be likely to settle on. I must be careful this time to keep clear of man-traps and gunpowder plots, and must get in while she is there, as she won't be likely to blow herself up, though there is no accounting for crazy folks."

Silently, and in his usual stealthy manner, Bob Strahan circled about the cabin, peering and listening at every possible chink, with the hope of discovering what sort of an occupant it might have.

But the best use he could make of his senses did not enable him to see or hear anything that could assist his surmises.

He had reached the rear of the cabin when he caught sight of something that encouraged him.

It was a small two-wheeled cart, leaning forward, with the ends of the shafts on the ground.

"This is the place," he said, with a subdued exclamation of joy, as he stole back to the front of the shanty.

"I reckon I've got a sure thing on it this time, and all I've got to do is to see that she don't get away. In the first place, and to provide against accident, I had better note the place where I hitched my horse."

The night was cloudy and dark; but he easily located the spot where he had left his steed.

He also located something else.

As his gaze, seemingly by an irresistible attraction, took the direction of the house he dreaded, a form robed in white issued from its open door.

It started toward the other side of the valley, as if with the intention of pursuing him.

It seemed to grow larger as it came, and to move with wonderful swiftness.

With a yell of terror he ran down the slope and across the Gulch at the top of his speed, and when he reached his house he was out of breath and trembling with excitement.

He sprung upon the back of the horse, galloped away up the valley at a breakneck gait, and did not draw rein until he was far from Cranch's Gulch.

The door of the little cabin opened as he was running away, and Crazy Kate peered out.

"I knew that he would come back here," she said; "but I wonder what scared him away?"

At that moment her restless eyes caught sight of the white form that had frightened him.

It was then on her side of the Gulch, but further down, and was moving from her at a rapid rate.

"Goodness gracious!" she exclaimed. "What can that be?"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE HAUNTED HOUSE.

IN the early summer a great change had come over Cranch's Gulch.

As if by magic the locality had been transformed from a cheerless solitude into a bright and busy human hive, though it was by no means an attractive one.

The silver strike had been a success.

The mine had already proved to be profitable.

Crazy Kate's money, added to their own, had enabled the two discoverers to open it in good style, and its fame had speedily been spread abroad.

At first the ore had been shipped away; but its richness had attracted other enterprise, and a Denver firm had offered to contract for putting up a mill in the Gulch and transforming the crude ore into silver bullion.

As such a contract would not give the Denver people any interest in the mine outside of their own operations, the offer had been accepted, and the works were being erected.

These employments had necessarily brought many people to the Gulch, which had suddenly assumed the appearance of a prosperous mining-camp, with a full allowance of saloons, gambling-houses, and other establishments for absorbing the superfluous cash of the community.

All the old and deserted cabins and shanties had been repaired and occupied, with the exception of one.

The single exception was the best of the old buildings—that which Old Gabe and Henry Hinton had first visited on their arrival at the Gulch, and in which they had found the body of young Gabe Cryder.

The youth's grave had been inclosed with a neat fence, and the plot had been carefully sodded and planted with flowers, and a marble headstone recorded the name and age of the deceased.

But, as if by unanimous consent, the log cabin in which he met his death remained closed and unoccupied.

Not because there had been no endeavor made to occupy it.

It had naturally attracted the attention of the first comers to Cranch's Gulch when the news of the silver strike began to bring settlers to the valley.

One of them had taken possession of the cabin, highly pleased at finding such a desirable tenement so entirely at his disposal.

After he had cooked and eaten his evening meal, and had smoked his pipe he had laid down to enjoy a most satisfactory repose.

He was awakened by a peculiar feeling—the usual uncomfortable sensation of a cold draught that precedes the appearance of a ghost.

He looked up, and was surprised to see the door of the cabin standing open.

His surprise turned to terror when he perceived in the doorway a sheeted form that glared at him with awful eyes.

It glided into the room as only a ghost can glide, stooped for a moment near the fireplace where the blood-stains still were, and then glided out, as silently and as ghost-like as it had entered.

The tough and sturdy miner, who had never been known to quail before any real and tangible danger, was so overcome by the presence of the apparition, that he was unable to move a muscle of his body or to utter a cry.

He lay there as if paralyzed until the ghastly object had departed.

Then he arose, trembling in every nerve, drank nearly a pint of whisky without stopping to breathe, gathered up his traps and moved out, camping for the remainder of the night on the damp ground, at a respectable distance from that haunted house.

In the morning he told the story of his adventure, but the appearance of the ghost was not news to those to whom he told it.

Crazy Kate had been the first to observe it, —not counting Bob Strahan—and after the disappearance of that reprobate she reported it to Gabe Cryder.

The old man was incredulous, finding it an easy matter to disbelieve such a story from such a source.

But after a few nights she reported it to him again, and she was so thoroughly in earnest

about the matter, that he determined to sit up and watch for it.

Without mentioning his purpose to Mollie, he left his cabin a little before midnight, and posted himself behind a clump of trees at a little distance from the haunted house.

He saw the ghost, and was obliged to admit that the sight was too much for his nerves.

The apparition rose as if from the grave of his murdered son, and it moved around toward the front of the cabin, without seeming to walk or even to touch the ground.

Old Gabe found himself powerless in its presence.

He could not have pursued it if he had made the effort, and he was quite sure that he did not want to try.

Yet he felt that for the sake of his manhood he ought to do something.

He had nearly mustered up the nerve that he needed, when the apparition, which had entered the cabin, issued forth from the open door, and sped swiftly and silently down the slope and to the other side of the valley.

For the life of him, Old Gabe could not follow it.

He had faced grizzlies, red-skins, and the most dangerous varieties of white men without a tremor; but that specter, as he afterward confessed to Crazy Kate, took the starch out of him.

The apparition was not seen again until after Henry Hinton's return from Denver, and then Gabe Cryder and his young partner had a consultation about it.

By that time the old man, having thought the matter over carefully, had come to the conclusion that the vision, as he expressed it, was a fraud.

Somebody was playing ghost for the purpose of making mischief or annoyance, and in his opinion, Crazy Kate was responsible for the trick.

As there was no other person to suspect, it is no wonder that he suspected her.

He determined to put a stop to the proceedings by watching Crazy Kate instead of the ghost.

With that view he went to her cabin one evening after supper, and explained to her a portion of his purpose.

"I want to sit up here to-night and watch for the ghost," said he. "There is such a good view of that house from this place, that I can see anything that goes on over there without being seen."

Being a wakeful and restless person, she was quite willing to sit up and watch for the ghost, and was quite willing to have the old man's company.

His reasoning was that if the ghost should fail to appear while Crazy Kate remained in her cabin, it would be fair to suppose that she had something to do with producing the apparition.

The result was astounding to him, completely overthrowing his theory.

It was near the hour of midnight when he and the woman, seated together at the door of her cabin, caught sight of the ghost at the same time.

As before, it seemed to arise from his son's grave, and was a sheeted form, with great spots of blood on its breast.

As before, it passed around to the front of the cabin, reappeared after a brief interval, and again sped down the slope and across the gulch, disappearing in the direction of the lower valley.

Old Gabe returned to his own cabin, and informed Hinton that there could be no mistake about the matter; that the apparition was no trick or illusion, but an actual ghost.

His partner, though he steadily refused to believe in the supernatural theory, was quite unable to account for the vision in any plausible manner.

Among the saloons that infested Cranch's Gulch was that of Sheeny Aaron, who had moved his establishment thither soon after the news of the silver strike began to bring a fresh influx of population to the valley.

His place did not really deserve to be styled a saloon, as the name of den would have better suited it.

In fact, it soon acquired the title which it had received in its former location, of Cut-throat Kingdom.

At the Gulch, as well as in his old abode, Sheeny Aaron seemed to prefer a sort of seclusion, as he established himself near the head of the valley, out of sight of the new settlement.

He had chosen the first in order of the old cabins, and had added to it, if he had not improved upon it, until it was of itself quite a colony.

His old customers, employees, dependents, or whatever they might be, had stuck to him.

If they had not emigrated with him, they had kept track of him, and he was continually favored with their company.

One night in early summer, when several of "the old gang" were gathered in Sheeny Aaron's dingy bar-room, a tall and broad-shouldered man came in, who was at once recognized and greeted as Bob Strahan.

He acknowledged the greeting in his usual

surly and scowling style, and vigorously demanded some "sop."

"You promised to be here more'n a week ago, Bob," observed his most intimate friend, Muley Mike. "We've been eatin' our heads off a-waitin' fur you. Where've you been all this while?"

"Durned nice question to ask," gruffly answered Strahan, "when you might have found out, if you had cared anything for me. But I never find any friends when I get in trouble."

"What sort o' trouble did you git into, pard?"

"I've been in hock."

"Whar?"

"Up to Denver. That sneakin' cuss of a Silver Sam did it. Do you remember hearing of a man and a woman that were wiped out last fall, up Central City way?"

Some of his hearers shuddered as they recalled that bloody and brutal tragedy.

"He wanted to make out that I had done that trick. So he caught me unawares, and hauled me up and juggled me."

"But you didn't do it, Bob, did you?" inquired another.

"He couldn't prove it, anyhow," replied Bob Strahan, with a chuckle. "I proved an *alibi*, as the lawyers call it, and proved it so clean and solid that he had to give in, and I was turned loose. He swears that he will get me foul yet, and I swear that I will get even with him for the new and the old. That's all."

"We're powerful glad that you've got here at last," remarked Muley Mike. "Thar's business to be done in this gulch; but we wanted you to show the way and take the lead."

"That's what I'm here for, and you can bet your last dollar that I mean to attend to business. I've got more than one settlement to make."

As the night advanced Bob Strahan expressed a desire to go down toward the Gulch and see how the land lay.

"What's the use o' goin' at this time o' night?" demanded Muley Mike. "What ken we do in the dark, anyhow?"

"More than any other time. I can always take things in best in the dark. Besides, I ain't putting myself forward much here, and don't care to go on exhibition."

Bob Strahan started out from Sheeny Aaron's hostelry, accompanied by Muley Mike and two others.

The night was dark, and they were not likely to be observed as they strolled down the valley.

But there was something to be observed by them, and they observed it to their sorrow.

Strahan's objective point may have been the cabin which he had formerly located as Crazy Kate's, but he did not reach it.

As they drew near the haunted house, a white and ghost-like form issued from it, and moved swiftly down the slope.

It looked like a ghost, and moved like a ghost, and could be nothing but a ghost.

Muley Mike and his comrades stopped and trembled, unable for the moment to speak or move.

Upon Bob Strahan the apparition had a different effect.

He uttered a yell of terror, just as he had done on a previous occasion, and turned and fled ingloriously.

The others, put in motion by his flight, ran after him at the top of their speed.

When they reached Cut-throat Kingdom they were out of breath and out of humor with themselves, in no mood for prosecuting further investigations at night.

CHAPTER XX.

A WARM WELCOME HOME.

THE new settlement known as Cranch's Gulch had been, for the most part, established further down the valley than the old settlement had been.

It had naturally gravitated in the direction of the mine, which was of course the nucleus and main dependence of the population.

The old tenements, with the exception of the haunted house, were all occupied; but all the new buildings, again with one exception, had been located in the broader portion of the valley and in the neighborhood of the mine.

The last-named exception was Old Gabe's house, a passably neat and comfortable frame building, which stood near the cabin which had sheltered them after they brought Mollie to the Gulch.

It occupied a beautiful site, and, as Mollie was pleased with the situation, the house had been built there, in spite of her father's prejudice against the haunted cabin on the other side of the valley.

Thither had been brought all the costly and handsome furniture that had adorned the gilded cage of Gabe Cryder's bright bird in the neighborhood of Jintown.

At Cranch's Gulch it filled her room and overflowed into the rest of the house, greatly to the wonder and admiration of the rough miners who were permitted to stare at it.

Taking hasty advantage of the last days of the spring, Mollie had exerted herself to beautify

the ground about the house with all the flowering plants and shrubs she could procure, giving the place a pleasant and homelike aspect.

Henry Hinton lived in the new house with Gabe Cryder and his daughter, and there was another occupant—no less a personage than Crazy Kate, the third partner in the firm of mine-owners.

As soon as the house was finished the old man entreated her to become a member of his family, and, as she had by that time become very fond of Mollie Cryder, the solitary woman readily consented.

When the mine began to show signs of prosperity she was also persuaded to change her dress for the better, and her ways, to a considerable extent, changed with it, though her old restlessness and wildness would occasionally break out unexpectedly.

She became quite companionable, and there could not have been, they thought, a more handy woman, so thoroughly was she versed in many ways of making herself useful, and at the same time not destitute of accomplishments.

Down at the Gulch, as the new settlement was styled, was a small frame building that was used as the office of the mine-owners.

It had but little furniture besides a heavy safe that had been brought to the Gulch at heavy expense; but in a business way it was very attractive to the two male partners.

They were both very busy at those times, working by night and by day.

They were digging in the rocks for a fortune, and were determined to get it.

As the mine kept them closely employed during the day, they were obliged to work in the office at night, to prepare their plans and straighten up their accounts.

In view of their frequent absences Gabe Cryder had engaged an old plainsman, Abe Soutter by name, whom he knew to be thoroughly competent and reliable to guard the house and its female occupants.

One night, when business matters had detained them at the office until a late hour, they started for home together as usual.

Both were weary after a long and laborious day; but their minds were still active as they discussed the prosperity of the mine and laid plans for the future.

When they had passed out of the light and bustle and jollity of the mining-camp, the quiet and darkness of the valley above settled down upon them, and had a soothing effect upon their excited brains and nerves.

They ceased to talk about business, and spoke of their pleasant home and the welcome that awaited them there.

"Every other house is dark," said Hinton, as they came in sight of that pleasant home; "but there is a light in the window for us."

"That's so," cheerfully responded the old man. "Mollie never fails to remember it. Hello! It's out!"

"What does that mean?"

A sharp succession of revolver-shots told them that something serious was the matter, and filled them with rage and anxiety.

At the same instant they both started to run toward the house.

Henry Hinton believed himself to be a runner, and supposed that he could easily distance the old man.

But he was more than surprised at the swiftness with which Old Gabe picked up his feet and got over the ground.

In fact, the old man soon passed the young man, and got to the house ahead of him.

More shots were heard as they ran, and among them was the shrill scream of a woman.

As they came up a man was discovered sneaking around the end of the house, and Old Gabe fired at him on the wing.

The shot was followed by a yell, and another man came running out of the house, just in time to become another target for the old man's revolver.

Evidently he was not hit, as he fled swiftly away, in spite of two more shots that were sent after him.

Old Gabe and his partner ran into the house, fearful of what they might find there.

In the doorway lay Abe Soutter, dead, with his revolver in his hand, and his body pierced by more than one bullet.

There were no more enemies in sight; but what had been the fate of the other inmates of the house?

"Mollie! where are you?" shouted Old Gabe, as he threw open the door of the first room he came to.

Crouched in a corner was a woman with a revolver in her hand, who sprang up with a glad cry at the sound of the old man's voice.

It was not Mollie, but Crazy Kate.

"Where is Mollie?" demanded the old man.

"She was here when those villains came, and then she ran into her room, I suppose. I have not seen her since."

A bright light shot up by the window at the end of the house, followed by the fierce crackling of flames.

"The infernal scoundrels!" shouted Old Gabe. "They have set fire to the house! Look after Mollie, my boy, and I will attend to the fire."

He ran out of the house and around to the spot where he had seen the man at whom he first fired.

The man was lying there, and was dead enough; but it seemed that he had piled combustibles against the house, and had been able to light the mass after he was shot.

Old Gabe perceived at once that the fire was beyond his control.

The flames had already seized upon the light boards and framework of the building, which burned almost as easily as shavings.

Help was at hand; but it was even then certain that nothing could save the house.

Some of the men who occupied the old tenements in the vicinity had been aroused by the reports of pistol-shots.

Then the almost immediate breaking out of the flames had alarmed them further, and had sent them flying to the scene as fast as their legs could carry them.

Henry Hinton, startled by the fire, and fearful about Mollie, dashed into her room as the old man ran out of the house.

He did not see her there, and he called her in vain.

Hastily striking a light, he perceived what looked like a pile of blankets in a corner.

Plucking away a blanket, he found Mollie Cryder under it, silent, motionless, and apparently dead.

Had she been murdered?

There was no blood visible, nor was there any sign of a wound.

Perhaps the frightened girl had thrown a blanket over her form as she crouched in the corner, thinking thus to conceal herself, and had then fainted.

The young man picked her up, and carried her out of doors, just as Old Gabe, reinforced by his neighbors, came forward to fight the fire.

Calling Crazy Kate to his assistance, he discovered that she was unhurt, and soon she revived and spoke to him.

Her eyes opened upon a scene of horror.

The house which had lately become her pleasant home was in flames and rapidly being consumed.

But she was grateful for the knowledge of the safety of her father, with Henry and Kate.

As it was clearly useless to attempt to fight the fire, Gabe Cryder and his friends devoted their efforts to saving as much of the contents of the house as they could.

They did not succeed in saving much; but the little they could get out was useful to them in their emergency.

The miner who occupied the cabin which had formerly been their home vacated it for them, and Mollie and Kate were moved in there and made comfortable.

The house, with the greater part of Gabe Cryder's costly furniture, was consumed in a brief period of time.

"I think, Uncle Gabe," remarked Hinton, "that I know the rascal we fired at and missed."

"I reckon I know him, too."

"I know him by his back, and by that long lobe of his."

"Just so, my boy. 'Twas the Pike's Peak galoot—that scoundrel of a Bob Strahan. But we can make sure of that. No doubt Crazy Kate saw him, and she has good reason to know him, poor thing."

She was interrogated, and at once confirmed their belief.

"It was *him*," she said, with her usual disregard of grammar when speaking of him. "I knew that he would come after that money, and it was a good thing that I put it into the mine, so that he couldn't get it."

Further inquiry developed the fact that Abe Soutter had fallen in the defense of his post.

He had casually stepped to the door, where he had been confronted by the marauders, and the firing had begun instantly.

Apparently they had seen him first, and he had received his death-wound before he began to use his revolver.

At the first shot Mollie screamed and ran to her room.

Bob Strahan, doubtless being aware of the fact that Gabe Cryder and Henry Hinton were at the Gulch, had rushed in over the body of poor Abe Soutter, and had been confronted by Crazy Kate, into whose composition the element of fear seemed not to have entered.

"You here?" he exclaimed, with a terrific oath.

She intimated pretty plainly that it was her personal self who stood before him.

"Curse you! I don't want you now. Where is that girl?"

"None of your business."

"I heard her squarely, and I mean to have her."

"Stand where you are, you bloody villain, or I will call down the vengeance of Heaven upon your head."

Crazy Kate leveled a revolver at the intruder, as if she meant business.

He started toward the door of Mollie's room, and she pulled the trigger; but her pistol missed fire.

Before she could try again there was a shot

outside, followed by a yell of pain, and Strahan turned and ran out.

"I wasn't fixed for him this time," said Kate, and my shooter was out of order; but I would have laid him out before he could get hold of Mollie."

CHAPTER XXI.

"CUT-THROAT KINGDOM MUST GO."

THE dastardly attack upon Gabe Cryder's house, with the burning of the building and the death of Abe Soutter, caused a great commotion in Cranch's Gulch.

Old Gabe, in his capacity of a mine proprietor and employer of labor, had already endeared himself, not only to the men who worked in the mine, but to all the honest and well-meaning inhabitants of the Gulch, and the honest and decent people were largely in the majority there, as well as almost everywhere else.

Henry Hinton was also well liked, and the beauty and amiability of Uncle Gabe's daughter were such a source of pride to the Gulchers that they were always ready to die in her defense.

Of all the institutions of Cranch's Gulch she was regarded as the most sacred, the most valuable, and the most unapproachable.

That such a mean and outrageous crime should be committed right there was enough to cause all the Gulchers to climb up on their ears without the aid of a step-ladder.

It was the unanimous opinion of Cranch's Gulch that something must be done to teach scoundrels a lesson and to prevent such outbreaks in the future.

Somebody must be made to suffer.

It did not require long consideration to decide where and upon whom the suffering should be inflicted.

The man who had been shot by Old Gabe, and who had started the fire, was recognized as an *habitué* of Cut-throat Kingdom, and Bob Strahan was also reputed to be one of Sheeny Aaron's best customers.

Therefore Cut-throat Kingdom and Sheeny Aaron "must go."

The plague-spot must be wiped out, no matter what rough surgery might be needed to effect the object.

Thus was the affair talked of, and such was the conclusion about the matter the next morning.

The proprietors of the saloon all declared that Cut-throat Kingdom "must go," and they were, with very few exceptions, the most influential citizens of Cranch's Gulch.

Before noon a messenger waited on Old Gabe and Henry Hinton, where they were at work as usual in the mine, and informed them that a few friends desired to see them at their office.

There they found a committee of the influential citizens aforesaid, who at once stated their business plainly.

It was comprised in a few words:

"Cut-throat Kingdom must go!"

"That den, in the opinion of the committee, was worse than an eyecore. It was a nuisance which must be abated."

There might be an occasional fight or a row in the Gulch, and possibly some man who could not shoot quite as quickly as another man might require a funeral.

But such affairs were entirely natural, incidental to civilized society, decently and honorably conducted, and caused no bad blood or serious social disturbance.

They could easily be lived over and forgotten.

But Cut-throat Kingdom was notoriously a harbor for scoundrels, a resting-place for villains, a magnet that attracted the worst characters of the plains, the mountains and the gulches, a sore which diffused infection all about it, and was specially dangerous to the moral health of Cranch's Gulch.

Thieves and burglars and highway robbers and midnight assassins could not be tolerated at any price, and whatever produced or fostered them must be crushed out of existence.

Cut-throat Kingdom was notorious as an abode of villainy, and it was known to be a fact that the scoundrels who raided and burned Gabe Cryder's home had come from there and belonged there.

It was not right that such a den should exist to breed and foster scoundrels.

Therefore Cut-throat Kingdom ought to be wiped out, and it was the unanimous opinion of the committee that a certain fixed and definite number of the law-abiding citizens of Cranch's Gulch should quietly go up there at night and effectually wipe it out.

The mine-owners agreed with all these statements, and promptly accepted the conclusions of the committee.

They would not have thought of opposing their opinions to those of the most influential citizens of the Gulch, except in a matter that seriously concerned their business interests.

As they were clearly of the opinion that Cut-throat Kingdom ought to be wiped out, they assented to the manner in which it was proposed to expunge the nuisance.

They simply suggested that it would be well to attend to the business in as orderly and peace-

ful a manner as possible, without bloodshed or unnecessary cruelty.

If Bob Strahan should be found there, he should of course be captured; but it would be sufficient to warn the others away from Cranch's Gulch and its vicinity.

This course was agreed upon, and the plan of procedure was arranged, and the men who were to carry it out were selected.

Then nothing more was said about the matter during the day.

At night twenty reliable men left the Gulch, all well armed, not in a body, but singly, or by twos or threes, rendezvousing at a spot a little distant from the camp.

Sedately and silently they tramped up the valley to Sheeny Aaron's den, which they proceeded to put in a state of siege, several men being stationed at the back door and the single window.

There were lights inside, and sounds of uproarious jollity told the Regulators that Sheeny Aaron's pets were enjoying a grand carouse.

Headed by Old Gabe, who insisted upon taking the lead, the main body marched in at the front door in single file, and took possession of the premises.

There was a sudden pause in the revelry as those solid and solemn men filed in, without speaking a word, and ranged themselves in military fashion within supporting distance of each other.

At first some of the hard subjects of Sheeny Aaron's Kingdom, inflamed by bad whisky, and guessing the object of the intrusion, were disposed to show fight.

But the fact that they were outnumbered by an organized band, and the further fact that each of the intruders held a cocked revolver ready for instant use, speedily quenched their warlike ardor.

They submitted in silence, showing their displeasure only by scowls.

The first object of the Regulators was to discover Bob Strahan.

But that reprobate was not present, nor could he be accounted for.

"Where is Bob Strahan?" sternly demanded Old Gabe.

Sheeny Aaron admitted his acquaintance with the man, but solemnly declared that he knew nothing of his whereabouts.

A close and careful search of the premises was made by a portion of the party, while the remainder kept guard over the bar-room and its inmates.

When one of the tough subjects made a move to leave the house, he was at once convinced of the fact that he was a prisoner.

Old Gabe was finally informed that the search had failed to disclose the presence of Bob Strahan.

There was a visible appearance of relief among the tough subjects.

Doubtless they supposed that the Regulators, having satisfied themselves on that point, would quietly go away.

But there was a surprise in store for them.

"Very well," replied the old man. "If he is hid anywhere about this shebang, the fire will find him. Now, all you cusses and skunks and scoundrels, just git up and git!"

The tough subjects stared in amazement at this order, suspecting its purpose, but not fully comprehending its meaning.

"Git up and git!" repeated Old Gabe.

"That's the word with the bark on. We give the whole pack of you just ten minutes to clear out of here, and if we ever ketch one of you within five miles of Cranch's Gulch again, we will string him up to the nearest tree. 'Twouldn't take much to start us to doin' that trick right now. Better hurry up, you red-eyed galoots, as fire is goin' to clean out this place right quick."

This was plain enough, and the tough subjects, whatever their feeling may have been, accepted the situation without a murmur.

All but Sheeny Aaron, who burst into tears and protestations, imploring the Regulators not to destroy his precious property.

"It has all got to go," replied Old Gabe. "Take your money, if you will, and anythin' else you can pick up inside of five minutes, as your time is half gone now. We mean to nip this thing in the bud, and to tear it up by the roots."

Already a pile of combustibles had been made on the bar-room floor, and the pile was saturated with Aaron's whisky and coal oil, and kegs of liquor were heaped upon it.

Hardly had the proprietor collected such few valuables as he could carry, when his time was up, and he was hustled out after the others.

Then the pile was lighted, and in a few minutes the interior of the establishment was blazing like a furnace.

As the tribe of Aaron sadly wandered up the valley, their way was lighted by the flames that arose from the robbers' roost.

The Regulators remained on the spot until there was nothing left of Sheeny Aaron's shebang but a heap of coals and ashes; but they saw nothing of Bob Strahan.

Then they returned to the Gulch, glad that they had made an end of Cut-throat Kingdom.

CHAPTER XXII.

SILVER SAM'S WARNING.

THE night after the destruction of Cut-throat Kingdom, when Old Gabe and his young partner were as usual hard at work in their office, a stranger walked in and bade them good-evening.

He was a muscular and wiry man to look at, sandy-haired, with an auburn beard, and plainly dressed.

There was nothing specially noticeable about him, except the fire that occasionally flashed from his bright blue eyes, and a general appearance of solidity and reserved force, such as was calculated to impress those who chanced to be in his company.

"You don't seem to know me, Gabe Cryder," he quietly remarked, as he helped himself to a seat.

"But I do seem to," responded the old man, rubbing his eyes and staring.

"I seem to, and that's all that comes of it. I ought to know you, but somehow I can't place you. Give me a light, please. What shall I call you?"

"Sam Slevin."

"Silver Sam, who used to be sheriff up at Central City."

"Now you've struck it."

The old man jumped up, grasped the stranger's hand, and wrung it heartily.

"Silver Sam!" he exclaimed. "Well, I should say that I ought to know you. You are one of the men that I have good reason to remember, and why is it that I didn't drop onto you at first sight? It must have been that those pink whiskers deceived me. You didn't use to wear them, and they make a big change in your looks."

"You are not the first man who has noticed that, Uncle Gabe."

"Mr. Slevin, this is my partner, Henry Hinton. It is worth while to know him, as he is a fine young fellow."

"I have heard of him before now," answered Silver Sam as he acknowledged the introduction.

"Yes, Harry is well known about here, and well beliked, too."

"It was not anywhere about here that I heard of him."

"That so? Where was it?"

"I may tell you after a while."

"All right. Take your time. I want to tell you, Harry, what cause I have to remember this man."

"It was when a stage goin' to Silver City was held up, and there were four first-class scamps in the job."

"I was inside of the contraption, with them other men passengers and one woman, and Sam Slevin was one of the men; but I didn't know him then from Adam's off ox."

"When I heard the yell, I knew what was up, and was ready for business."

"I looked around to see what sort of backin' I was likely to git; but two of the men had weakened and were ready to give up everythin' they had."

"Only one pulled a pistol when I did, and I saw by the snap of his eyes that he meant mischief."

"That was Silver Sam."

"He jumped out on one side of the durned old hearse, and I jumped out on the other, and you may bet your bottom dollar that for a few minutes the fur flew lively."

"Each of us was hit and hurt; but we stood up to our work, and we cleaned out those scamps."

"Two of them we turned into stiffs, and the other two were glad to scamper."

"Now you know, Harry, why I have cause to remember Sam Slevin, and you may guess that I am glad to meet him here."

"I am glad to meet him, too, Uncle Gabe, and would be proud to call him my friend."

"Why, youngster, that was nothing," observed Silver Sam. "Gabe Cryder has been in plenty of tougher scrapes than that, and so have I; but he happened to remember it because those two sprouts in the stage wilted, and left us to do the work."

"That's where you're wrong," retorted the old man. "I remember it because you were so ready to do the work, and because you were so cool and quick in doin' it. It was your style that I admired. What are you doin' for your country now, Sam?"

"Nothing in particular. Just wandering about."

"I'm glad that you wandered here. Better stop here, now that you've come. This mine is bound to be a big thing, and there's a job for you if you want it."

"Thank you, Gabe; but I can't say that I want it, though I came to speak to you about the mine. You did a good thing last night in cleaning out that shebang at the head of the Gulch."

Gabe Cryder admitted that he was of the same opinion with regard to the destruction of Cut-throat Kingdom.

"Yes, it was a good thing, as far as it went; but I am afraid that you rooted it up only to plant it in another place."

"How so?"

"Cut-throat Kingdom was as bad as it well could be when it was near Trailton, and when it moved down to Cranch's Gulch it was for no good purpose. I have good reason to believe that Sheeny Aaron and his crowd came here with the view of making mischief about that mine of yours."

This naturally awakened the interest of the two partners, who anxiously inquired the grounds of his belief.

Sam Slevin narrated his adventure at Sheeny Aaron's former den, when he heard Henry Hinton's name mentioned, and detailed the plot against the silver mine as far as it had reached his ears.

"I was there," he said, "for the purpose of trapping that same Bob Strahan. I wanted him for the murder up on Plumas Creek."

"What murder was that?" inquired the old man.

"Did you never hear of it? It was a horrible affair, cowardly as well as brutal."

"A man and a woman named Wilburn were murdered in their house at night by a man who came there in the early evening and took supper with them."

"It was supposed that he went to bed in the house, got up at night and shot Wilburn as he lay asleep, and killed the woman when she had jumped up and was struggling for her life. The room was a shocking sight when he had finished his work and gone away, and it made strong men sick to look at it."

"Nobody knew how much money the Wilburns had in the house; but none was found there after the deed was done; and yet I soon had reason to believe that the murder was not committed for the sake of plunder."

"From a man who saw the murderer ride up and enter the house, and from another who happened in there while he was at supper with the Wilburns, I got a good description of him, and soon settled it that he was Bob Strahan, a man who had already gained a bad reputation in those parts."

"Before I began to hunt him I learned by chance something of the history of the woman he had murdered."

"It seems that she was a married woman who was living in unlawful relations with the man Wilburn."

"Her husband, an Englishman named Strahan, had been the proprietor of a cattle farm in Nebraska; but she had worried and scandalized him by her goings on with other men, and finally had run away with that Wilburn, who was employed on the farm."

"Then the Englishman sold out his property, and left the country, cutting her and her son Bob adrift."

"Then it was Bob Strahan who murdered his own mother!" exclaimed Hinton.

"Exactly so, as I make it out. He was a bad egg altogether; but it is charitable to suppose that he set out with the intention of killing the man who had gone off with his mother."

"If so, he was in no hurry to carry out his intention, or found it difficult to get on Wilburn's trail, as he was around the divide, and pretty notorious at that, for two or three years before he struck his man."

"Perhaps—it is charitable to suppose that, again—he did not mean to kill the woman; but she may have angered him by reproaching him with the death of Wilburn, and so he finished the job by making an end of her."

"From what I know of the scoundrel," observed Old Gabe, "I shouldn't wonder if you are a bit too charitable in your supposin's."

"Well, I would rather be too much that way than too much the other way. Anyhow, I wanted the man for that murder, and was looking for him when I struck that scrape at Sheeny Aaron's shebang."

"Though I had to get out of there in a hurry, I didn't lose sight of Mr. Bob Strahan, but tracked him to Denver, where I got him foul and pulled him in."

"Then came the queerest part of the business."

"When I tried to get a magistrate to hold him, he proved himself clear as easy as I could whistle."

"About half a dozen men—some of them good and straight men, too—swore solidly that he was more than fifty miles from Wilburn's house on the night of the murder."

"My two witnesses stuck to it that he was there; but the others were too many for them, and Mr. Bob Strahan walked away from there, a free man."

"How do you account for that?" asked Henry Hinton. "How was it that two sets of witnesses could place the same man at the same time at two places so far apart?"

"That question worried me for some time," answered Sam Slevin. "I thought of it, and inquired into it closely, and at last came to the conclusion that it was not the same man."

"Not the same man?"

"Just that. I now believe that Bob Strahan has a double—a man who looks so exactly like him that people are easily deceived by the resemblance. I believe, too, that he is aware of the existence of his double, and uses him to carry

out his evil purposes. That is to say, when he plans to commit a crime, he causes his double to appear in some public place at a time fixed upon, so that there may be plenty to swear to an *alibi* for the real scoundrel."

"That does make it hard to ketch him," observed Old Gabe.

"I should say that it does. The only chance that I can see is to catch him in the act and settle with him on the spot. That is why I am here. I wanted to tell you of his intentions, and to be on hand to nab him when he tries to carry them out."

"Do you really believe," asked the old man, "that he means to go for our property?"

"I am sure of it, and since you have begun to send your silver bars to market, instead of the ore, it will be well for you to be careful how you send them."

CHAPTER XXIII.

PLANS AND COUNTERPLANS.

THE day after the arrival of Sam Slevin at Cranch's Gulch, his warning of the intentions of the tribe of Aaron was singularly emphasized.

A stage had been started some time previously, to run between Cranch's Gulch and Denver, and an express service had of course been organized.

A quantity of silver bars, the first product of the new reducing works, had been consigned to the express to be carried to Denver, and all parties interested were jubilant over the shipment.

But it came, to grief, and their joy was turned to sorrow.

At a distance of less than twenty miles from Cranch's Gulch, and shortly after night had set in, the stage was "held up."

The driver, after the manner of drivers, was obedient to the first hail to halt; the passengers, as usual, were paralyzed, and the express messenger and one guard were not sufficient for the protection of the property committed to their charges.

Thus there was a general surrender, and the stage and its passengers were despoiled.

Everything of value was taken, including the silver bars.

Then the stage and its passengers were permitted to go on, lighter in substance but heavier in heart, and the express messenger returned to Cranch's Gulch to report the disaster.

Coming right on the heels of Silver Sam's warning, this robbery had a special meaning for the mine proprietors.

Believing that they knew who were responsible for the robbery, they also supposed that they knew what steps to take to prevent the recurrence of similar outrages.

Following the advice of Silver Sam, they arranged a special guard for the next consignment of silver.

The stage was loaded with armed men, and a mounted detachment followed at an appointed distance behind it, the intention being that the supporting column should be out of sight and hearing of the robbers when they made their attack, but near enough to catch the sound of the shooting and hasten to the rescue of the stage.

This plan was well laid; but like many other plans, it had its weak points.

Its strongest possibility of failure lay in the fact that intelligence of it was brought to the enemy.

Among the robbers there was at least one person who could plan and counterplan, and a prime necessity of his planning was a spy in the camp of the other side.

While the men of Cranch's Gulch were considering and organizing, the tribe of Aa on were gathered in a mountain glen, not far from the spot in the road that had witnessed the robbery of the stage, and were considering the same subject from their own point of view.

It was evident that they were not permanently located in the glen, but were merely occupying a temporary camp, from which they could steal away like the Arabs at a moment's notice.

All, or nearly all, of the tough crowd that had been expelled from Cut-throat Kingdom were there, and they had even gathered a few recruits, who had been brought to them by the fame of the profitable attack upon the stage.

Bob Strahan was there, the acknowledged leader of the band, and he was in high feather, felicitating his comrades and extolling himself upon that successful stroke.

"The galoots of Cranch's Gulch," he was saying, "thought they had done a big thing when they drove us away and burned down Aaron's shebang; but it was the best thing they could have done for us."

"Dot vash a big expensh to me," grumbled Aaron.

"It shall be made up to you, old man, and more than made up. You shall be swimming in silver before we get through with these suckers. We are better off here than we were there, by a large majority, and all the back counties heard from. Less whisky, but more work and more money. The sneaks only stirred us up and made us attend to business. Now we're all here,

and we've got to stick together and work together, and there's no telling what a bonanza we will have out of this thing."

Bob Strahan's comrades expressed their admiration of his sentiments enthusiastically, and drank his health out of an assortment of flat bottles.

"Look at the haul we made the other night," he exclaimed, as he proceeded to expatiate upon the glorious theme.

"Think of those chunks of silver, which we can easily get cash for, to say nothing of the money and watches and other little things we pulled in! What is to keep us from running this business as long as we want to? How are they going to get their silver out, unless they weaken and buy us off? They can't afford to send an army to guard the stuff, and even an army couldn't hunt us down and break us up. I tell you, boys, we've got 'em foul, and it ain't the money only that we're sure of, but a chance to settle up our grudges; and most of us, I reckon, have got some grudges against that Cranch's Gulch crowd."

Most of them freely admitted that they had grudges which they would be glad to satisfy.

"I've got my grudges, I know," continued the leader; "and I am keen to bet that Aaron here would not be likely to get down on his knees and thank those galoots for burning up his shebang and all his stuff."

Aaron declared, with tears in his eyes, that he would give more than a little to get even with the Regulators who had ruined him.

"It is your turn to ruin them now," said Strahan, "and it won't cost you a cent. We've got a good thing, boys, and all we need to do is to run it for all it's worth. Hello! what's that?"

It was the snort of a horse, and sharp ears soon heard the tramp of a horse's feet on the soft ground of the forest.

Evidently there was only one horse, however, and no cause for alarm.

"S'pect it's Bill the Butcher, with news from the Gulch," suggested Muley Mike.

Bill the Butcher it proved to be—a decent-looking young fellow, not a bit bloodthirsty in appearance, who had taken his name from the trade he formerly followed.

His quiet manners and fair reputation had caused him to be selected to play the part of a spy in the camp of Cranch's Gulch.

The news he brought was interesting and highly important.

It amounted to the facts that have been stated concerning the precautions that were to be taken to guard the next shipment of treasure from the Gulch.

He had also got hold of the further fact that the stage was to leave the Gulch at an earlier hour than usual, so as to pass the supposed dangerous spots before dark.

Some countenances fell at this warlike news; but Bob Strahan was confident and elated.

"That is right into our hand!" he exclaimed.

"Leave it all to me, boys, and you will see us come out at the top of the heap. Those suckers must have maggots in their heads if they fancy that we haven't got sense enough to pick the place where we want to hold them up, or that they can fool us with any such drop-shot game as that. We will show them a trick that will pull their eye-teeth."

Under the direction of Bob Strahan, the band broke up camp and mounted their horses, and picked their way through the hills until they reached the main road.

They struck it at a point considerably further from Cranch's Gulch than the scene of their previous exploit of stage-robbery, and then they kept on until they reached a narrow pass.

This pass was hardly deep enough to be dignified with the name of canyon; but the hills on each side were so close together that there was only room for the road, and on each side of the wagon-track there was no passage for horsemen. In fact, it would be a difficult matter for men on foot to make their way outside of the road.

Bob Strahan, who headed the party, looked closely at each side as he rode slowly into the pass, and, after a little while, halted and dismounted.

The hills at his stopping-point had a fair growth of trees, and some of them were pretty large.

Two of the largest grew nearly opposite to each other, and at but a little distance above the road.

It was these that the leader chose for his purpose.

There were axes in the party, and he set two of the men at work to cut each of the trees heavily on the roadside and lightly on the other side, so that a few strokes of the ax would fell them toward each other and into the road.

The two men who had cut them were stationed there, with strict orders not to stir from the trees.

"After the stage passes," said Strahan, "and as soon as you hear us shoot, drop those bits of timber into the road and then hurry up to join us. That's all, except that you must stay right there and keep your eyes and ears wide open."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A TERRIBLE DISASTER.

THE plans of the Cranch's Gulch people were carried out to the letter, just as Sam Slevin and his friends had laid them.

The stage which was to carry the second express shipment of silver took no passengers.

Instead of the usual allowance of travelers, there were six men inside, including the express guard.

The five who had been selected for that purpose were chosen from among the stanchest and most reliable of the fighting men of Cranch's Gulch, and they were all well armed with rifles and revolvers.

The driver was one of the same sort, and he was also armed and ready for action.

Behind the stage, at the distance that had been agreed upon, rode Sam Slevin at the head of half a dozen more fighting men, who were to keep carefully in the rear, according to the arrangement that had been detailed.

There did not seem to be a reasonable doubt that such a strong force, so well appointed and so well led, would be able not only to defend the treasure, but to capture the scoundrels who should attempt to seize it.

Old Gabe and Henry Hinton were both anxious to join either the advance or the supporting party, but were persuaded not to do so.

At the present stage of the mining enterprise their business required the constant attention of both of them, and why should they put themselves forward to fight robbers, when plenty of men were eager to hire themselves for that purpose?

Thus they were induced to stay at home, though the old man worried over the thought of such inglorious inactivity.

During the journey the men in the stage, who knew the peril they were exposed to, and believed themselves able to cope with any difficulty that might be expected to arise, kept a sharp lookout at all the possibly dangerous places along the route, and were especially on the alert as they approached the scene of the previous robbery.

But the stage passed that spot without being molested, and they began to believe that their careful plans and elaborate preparations were to go for nothing.

This was a keen disappointment to them as they were positively spoiling for a fight, and were confident of their ability to win.

The danger which they were to meet, however, came at an unexpected place and in an unexpected shape.

After he had stationed the axmen at the two trees, Bob Strahan led the remainder of his party a short distance up the road, to a point where the wagon-track was no wider than it was below, but the hills on each side were less rugged and precipitous.

The road below led up a pretty steep incline, where the progress of the stage would necessarily be slow.

Here he stationed men in ambush behind the rocks, so that they were thoroughly concealed from view.

"We've got 'em now!" exclaimed the leader, when he had completed his arrangements.

"We will fool them now as they were never fooled before. They have been trying to play roots on us, and we will show them that we can play roots, too."

"What's the little game, pard?" inquired Muley Mike.

"There'll be no stepping out and hailing them this time—no giving them a chance to get out their shooters and show fight. Not much. We will lie right here behind the rocks, and the first thing they will know of us will be a blizzard that will knock them stiff."

"Dot means bloody murder," protested Sheeny Aaron, who was frightened by this sanguinary proposition.

"It means money, you old fool, and it means getting even, and that is right into your hand. But you are one of these sneaks who would rather poison a man than shoot him."

The rest of the party were well pleased with the style of work proposed by their leader.

It would be less perilous for them, under the circumstances, than the legitimate fashion of stage robbing, and would plainly prove to the enemy that they meant business.

Cranch's Gulch had declared war against them, and war it was to be.

It was the dusk of the evening when they heard the crunching of the wheels of the stage on the gravel below, its jolting over the stones on the incline.

The men in the stage were as alert as ever when the four horses toiled up the slope; but there was nothing for them to see or hear—no suspicious sight or sound anywhere.

"Wait till I give the word," was Bob Strahan's order to his concealed assassins. "Then pour it into 'em!"

He waited until the stage was nearly opposite to his position.

Then he gave the signal, and fired the first shot.

The volley that was poured from behind the rocks was close, accurate and murderous.

Its effect was terrible in the extreme.

Two of the horses were shot by men detailed for that purpose, and this necessarily stopped the stage, the other poor beasts rearing and plunging until they fell with their companions.

The rest of the shots were sent into the stage, and every man with the possible exception of Sheeny Aaron, shot to kill.

There was no pretense or boy's play about the business.

The men from Cranch's Gulch had expected wild work, but nothing so dastardly and bloodily murderous as this.

As Bob Strahan had predicted, it "knocked them stiff."

It was not a fight, but a slaughter.

Three men, who had been partially shielded by their comrades who were shot, were able to crawl out of the stage on the side opposite to their enemies, and to make a show of fight behind the scanty shelter of the vehicle.

But it was a show that was quickly brought to an end.

The tribe of Aaron, as soon as they had fired that murderous volley, burst forth from their concealment, and with their revolvers forced the fighting at even closer range.

At the same time the two men who had been left to fell the trees came running up the hill, ready to do their share of the bloody work.

One of the stage men was shot down, another fled, and the third, who threw up his hands and surrendered, was ordered to follow the fugitive as fast as his legs could carry him.

Then the robbers turned their attention to the profitable portion of their task, and made quick work of it.

Regardless of the dead and the wounded they went for the treasure-boxes, burst them open, and distributed the silver bullion among the party, so that it could be conveniently carried.

Then they hastened to the place where they had left their horses, and made good time in getting away from the scene of murder and robbery.

Silver Sam and his party had been attending closely to the business of keeping at the agreed distance in the rear of the stage.

At the same time they were listening keenly and anxiously for the alarm that was expected to start them forward at a more rapid rate.

It did not come when they expected it to come, and they, like the men in the stage, began to fear that their mission would prove a failure.

It was dusk when the alarm came.

It came when they had almost ceased to listen for it, and the time as well as the manner of its coming was startling.

It was not a single shot, nor a succession of dropping shots, but such a volley as Bob Strahan had appropriately termed a blizzard.

"Come on!" shouted Sam Slevin. "Our boys are cracking it to them now!"

He spurred forward with his excited followers, and they dashed into the pass at a headlong gallop.

As they rode they heard blows like the strokes of an ax right ahead of them, and then there was a heavy crash, quickly followed by another.

The next moment they knew what it meant.

Their career was suddenly stopped by two trunks of trees, with their tangled masses of boughs, that had fallen across the road from opposite sides, completely blocking it.

Silver Sam, who was the first to reach the barrier, caught sight of two men in the growing darkness who were running up the road, and he sent an ineffective bullet after them.

The nature and cause of the trouble were quite too plain.

It was a scheme of the enemy to delay the rear party and separate it from the stage.

It was a scheme, too, that was painfully and exasperatingly successful.

None but flying horses could pass the obstruction, and the progress of the party as cavalry was at an end.

There was nothing for it but to dismount, hitch their horses, and work their way through on foot.

This they proceeded to do with the greatest possible dispatch; but it was a tedious and difficult task.

Before they got on the other side of the fallen trees the firing had entirely ceased, and an ominous silence prevailed.

What had happened?

It seemed almost incredible that their friends had been entrapped and defeated, and yet they could not help fearing that such was the case.

They hastened up the incline of the road, and soon knew that their worst fears were realized.

Two of their friends were missing, and of the remainder those who were not dead were mortally or seriously wounded.

The treasure had disappeared, and nothing was to be seen or heard of the murderous marauders.

After a little while the two missing men joined them, and told the sad story of the slaughter of the stage party.

Sam Slevin could scarcely speak a word.

His grief and anger were so intense that his face was as white as a sheet.

The two unhurt horses, which had not succeeded in freeing themselves from their harness,

were hitched to the vehicle, and it was turned around.

The dead men were loaded upon the top of the stage, and the wounded men were made as comfortable as possible inside.

An ax was part of the furniture of the stage, and it was used to clear a way through the fallen trees.

As it was the only implement of the kind in the possession of the party, and was none too sharp, the task required considerable time.

But the passage was opened at last, and the defeated and dispirited cavalcade slowly and sadly turned their steps homeward.

CHAPTER XXV.

GOLIAH THE GREAT.

CRANCH'S GULCH was astonished.

Such an unexpected and overwhelming calamity could not be regarded with the equanimity with which the Gulch usually considered the most exciting affairs, except when its blood was fired by bad whisky.

The blow was such a stunner that it was scarcely possible for any citizen of the Gulch to give adequate expression to his feelings.

When their tongues began to get loose, grief first found utterance—honest and heartfelt grief for the strong and brave men who had been so suddenly snatched away, as well as for those who were lingering at death's door.

Then came indignation, fiery, irrepressible, intense.

The wrath of the Gulch was so great that there was scarcely a man who was not willing to volunteer to wipe out the scoundrels who had committed the most bloody and infamous crime that had been heard of in that region for a long time.

It was a crime that came home to every one of them; for the prosperity of the Gulch was at an end if such outrages could be committed with impunity.

The shipment of silver must be stopped, and the work of the mine must cease, and down would go business of all kinds.

Then the Gulchers seriously considered the robbers and their manner of committing the robbery.

Concerning the robbers, there was no question of their identity, considered as a body.

There was no doubt that they were the tribe of Aaron, the recently expelled possessors of Cut-throat Kingdom, and the general belief was that they were led by Bob Strahan.

But the most important point was the manner in which they had outwitted and defeated the strong force sent to capture them.

It was unanimously agreed that there could not have been a better plan than that which had been so carefully followed, that no better men could have been chosen to execute it, and that they could have had no better leader than Sam Slevin.

But that plan had been defeated, and the style of its defeat showed that it must have been fully known to the robbers in its purpose and details.

It was true that it had been in a measure public property—such an expedition could not have been arranged and organized without being made known to many; but it was not so public that the news of it would have reached the marauders unless it was carried by a special messenger.

Therefore there must be a traitor in the Gulch—a spy in the camp.

This much was considered settled; but conjecture was at a loss when it was called upon to point him out.

All the residents and transient persons in the Gulch were subjected to a careful canvass and severe scrutiny, but without decisive result.

There were plenty who were not flawless, but not one upon whom public opinion could settle as likely to aid and abet the villainous designs of the tribe of Aaron.

This subject was discussed privately by Gabe Cryder, Henry Hinton, and Sam Slevin, in the office of the mine.

As no people were more deeply interested in the disaster than were those three, so none showed greater grief and indignation, or a more earnest desire to hunt down the criminals and make an end of them.

They had naturally arrived at the conclusion reached by the general public—that there was a spy in the camp, and that he must be discovered.

With the rest of the people they were also of the opinion that no punishment could be too severe for the wretch.

"I mean to go into this thing my full length," said Old Gabe. "I am ready to pitch my life into it, and everythin' else I can lay hold of. It's make or break with us, and that's a fact. If we can't clean those scoundrels out, they've got us under their thumb, and that cleans us out. My partner and I are willin' to mortgage our share in the mine to raise any money that may be needed, and to drop anythin' else to make a finish of this business."

Henry Hinton agreed warmly with the sentiments expressed by the old man.

"I don't see that there is much need of money," responded Silver Sam. "There are

plenty of men right here who are willing and ready to do all the work that the job requires, and all we want is to get hold of it at the right end and start in the right way. The best thing to do first, if we could do it, would be to catch that sneak of a spy."

A young man who was in the habit of bringing to the mine owners their letters from the post-office came in just then.

The Denver stage had been stopped, and there was no mail of any consequence; but he still went to the post-office regularly as usual.

He brought one letter, which he handed to Henry Hinton, and left the room.

Hinton looked at it curiously before he opened it, turning it over, and examining it carefully on the outside.

It was addressed to "Gabe Cryder & Co., Cranch's Gulch," and it bore no postmark.

"This is a queer-looking business letter," observed the young man as he tore it open.

He read it at a glance, and his exclamation of surprise attracted the instant attention of his companions.

"The audacity of those scoundrels is amazing," said he. "This seems to be a letter from them, and they want to make terms with us. Listen."

They listened eagerly, and this is what he read:

"GABE CRYDER & Co.:—

"What will you pay us by the week to let your silver stuff go free? If you want to fix up the thing and save trouble, we will be liberal. Write a letter directed to me, and tack it on the sign-post of the Spread Eagle saloon, and we will get it. Better be quick.

GOLIAH THE GREAT."

Sam Slevin took this strange epistle, and perused it carefully, closely examining the envelope, as Hinton had done.

It was written in a fair hand, and the spelling was correct, and the absence of a postmark showed that it had been dropped in the Cranch's Gulch post-office.

"This must have been written by our friend Bob Strahan," said he, "and the impudence of it is something sublime. The fact that it was posted nowhere, but dropped in the office here, right under our noses, puts it beyond a doubt that they have a spy at the Gulch, and gives us to understand that they don't care if we know it. They must be very sure that we can't find him out; but their impudence and audacity may carry them a bit too far. We will answer their letter, Uncle Gabe, and will offer them terms."

"Terms?" indignantly exclaimed the old man. "Not if I know myself. What sort of terms do you think we could offer to such a gang of murderers?"

"Blank terms," quietly answered Silver Sam, as he folded a blank sheet of paper, and placed it in an envelope, which he addressed to "Goliah the Great."

"They are to get the answer," said he. "Therefore somebody must take it from the sign-post and carry it to them. It really seems as if I ought to be able to catch that somebody."

As he wanted neither advice nor assistance, there was nothing more to be said than to wish him good luck.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A TRAP FOR A SPY.

CRANCH'S GULCH did not go to bed early.

If a man wished to be astir at an early hour in the morning, he was more likely to sit up all night and wait for the appointed time, than to go to roost with the chickens and trust to an alarm clock.

The saloons, which largely dominated the life of the Gulch, did not put out their lights and shut up shop until the small hours of the morning, and the majority of the inhabitants did not hunger for sleep while the saloons were open.

The Spread Eagle was an establishment which always kept open quite as long as any of the others, and sometimes a little longer.

On the night succeeding the receipt of the letter from "Goliah the Great," it was the last to close.

The only person left in the establishment at closing time, with the exception of the barkeeper, was Sam Slevin, who had then been put in charge of the Spread Eagle by the proprietor.

It was two o'clock in the morning when the lights were put out, and the front doors were closed.

When the barkeeper had gone to bed in the back room, Silver Sam baited his trap by tacking the letter to "Goliah the Great" on the sign post in front of the building.

Then he placed a lamp so that its light should shine through a crack in the shrunken boards of the shanty-built house, the rays falling on the post and the letter.

He stationed himself, as the principal portion of the trap, at another aperture, through which, while comfortably seated, he could see the post and its surroundings.

There he waited to spring the trap.

It was a rather long and lonely wait, but Sam Slevin was a patient man.

Now and then a belated citizen hurried or stumbled, according to the amount of tangle-

foot he had absorbed, past the saloon; but not one of them had anything to do with the letter.

In fact, it was not likely to be noticed, except by somebody who was looking for something of the kind.

Just as night was changing into day the right man came along.

At least, there was reason to suppose him to be the right man.

He was a man of medium size, with nothing specially noticeable about him, dressed in a blue sack coat, dark trousers, and dark slouch hat.

He was walking at a pretty rapid rate, looking neither to the right nor the left, and apparently taking no notice of the letter on the sign-post.

He walked so near the post that he brushed against it, and Slevin thought that he detected a quick motion of his arm as he went by.

When he had passed the post there was no longer any letter there, and that settled it.

Silver Sam was quite sure that the point was settled—that he knew his man, and was bound to get him.

So he jumped up, and hurried out to catch him.

Quick as his movements were, some two or three minutes were occupied in getting out, as the door was a bit obstinate; and when he reached the outside of the saloon his man had disappeared.

There was a man in sight slowly sauntering down the street, with a suspicious unsteadiness of gait; but the man who was wanted had been going up the street, and seemed to be quite sober.

Besides, the other man had worn a blue sack coat and a dark slouched hat, whereas this man's sack coat was drab, and his slouch hat was of a light color.

What had become of the other man?

Had he walked so swiftly that he had already reached the end of the block of shanties and turned off beyond them? or had he entered one of them?

Whichever of these suppositions was true, the other man must have been seen by the man who was coming down the street, and it would be worth while to question him.

Accordingly Silver Sam stepped briskly toward him and accosted him.

"Did you see a man going up the street just now, my friend?"

"See a man?" answered the other, stupidly, as he paused, and seemed to consider the question.

"Please be quick. Did a man pass you just now?"

"Yes, I reckon. Saw a man up yonner."

"Where did he go to?"

"Dunno. Seems like he kinder scooted."

The man who was wanted must have "scooted" around the corner of the last building, and Silver Sam hurried in that direction.

He looked around as he went, and perceived that the man he had questioned was just then taking a sharp backward glance at him.

It occurred to him at the moment that the man was not as drunk as he pretended to be.

It also occurred to him that he had noticed that the drab sack coat had a blue lining.

Seized by sudden suspicion, he turned quickly, and retraced his steps rapidly.

The drunken man had also quickened his pace, and this was another suspicious circumstance.

Suddenly he stumbled and fell flat on the ground.

Something white fluttered from his pocket.

Before he could rise Silver Sam was upon him, and had picked up the something white, which he saw at a glance was the letter directed to "Goliah the Great."

He also perceived that the hat which had fallen off was black on the inside, and that there was no doubt about the blue lining of the drab coat.

He clutched the collar of that coat firmly as he helped the man to his feet, and quelled him with a cocked revolver.

"It was a very good scheme, young man," said he; "but it didn't work."

"What do you mean?" demanded the other, who seemed to be fully in possession of his senses just then.

It was clear that he had turned his coat and his hat, that he had changed his course and his gait, and that he was the man who was wanted.

Slevin told him so, and showed him the letter.

"You took this letter," said he, "from the sign-post in front of the Spread Eagle as you went by, and put it in your pocket."

"Didn't do it," stolidly replied the man. "Don't know nothin' about the letter. If it was thar, it must ha' tumbled off and dropped into my pocket."

"As you passed by? Just so. You are the man who passed by, then? That's what I wanted to know. Come along, and don't try to kick, or you will be apt to kick the bucket."

With the persuasion of a firm grip and a cocked revolver, Silver Sam urged his subject to the door of the Spread Eagle, made him open

it, and ushered him in without relaxing either of the methods of coercion.

The barkeeper was aroused and directed to bring some more light to bear on the prisoner.

"Do you know this man, Jim?" inquired Slevin.

"Why, yes. It's Bill the Butcher. What's the matter with him?"

"He is the man we want—the spy who has been carrying news to the robbers. Tie his hands and feet, Jim, and then go and bring Gabe Cryder and Henry Hinton and Captain Merritt and Dick Smart."

Captain Merritt was at the head of the reducing works, and Dick Smart was the proprietor of the Spread Eagle.

Inside of an hour the men who had been sent for were all there.

It was then broad daylight; but the Spread Eagle was seldom opened before ten in the morning, and the conclave was held in the rear of the saloon by lamplight.

Bill the Butcher had before this time discovered the fact that he was "in a hole," and it is probable that he could not see his way clear to get out of it.

His scheme had been bold and feasible, and might have succeeded, in spite of the sharp eyes of Sam Slevin, if he had not been exposed by an accident.

He at once saw the folly of attempting to resist his captor who had "the drop" on him, and when the barkeeper was also opposed to him, he submitted quietly enough.

Silver Sam told the story of his capture to his friends, who easily saw through the game that had been played, and naturally asked the prisoner what he had to say for himself.

Bill the Butcher fell back upon obstinacy and ignorance, but found no relief there.

He professed not to know how the letter from the sign-post had got into his pocket, or anything about it.

"Why did you tell me that you saw a man up the street?" demanded Silver Sam.

"'Cause I did see a man."

"Why did you turn your coat and hat, and then turn back?"

"I dunno. Jest fur fun, I reckon."

"You will be likely to get plenty of fun out of this business before you get through with it. We don't need any more talk from you. You are up to your middle in the mud, and can't begin to wade out. We know that you have been playing the part of a spy between the Gulch and Bob Strahan's gang of murderers, and that means hanging of course. There is only one way for you to save your neck, and that is by telling us all you know about the business, and leading us to the hiding-place of those scoundrels."

Bill the Butcher protested that he knew nothing about Bob Strahan and his gang, and was utterly ignorant of the whereabouts of Sheeny Aaron and his tribe.

"Bring the rope," ordered Silver Sam. "If this man don't want to save his neck, we will string him up right here, and have no more bother with him."

The actual production of a rope, with the determined attitude of those who had him in charge, was too much for the obstinacy of Bill the Butcher.

He broke down, and promised to do all that was required of him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

GOING TO SHEAR A WOLF.

No time was lost in Cranch's Gulch after the spy had yielded to the strong persuasions that were employed upon him.

The terms that were to be offered to the enemy were no longer blank terms, but terms that were to be spelt with bullets and punctuated with percussion-caps.

Though one known spy had been caught, it was possible that there might be others who were not known, and therefore it was necessary to use all the caution that was practicable.

Silver Sam requested the other members of the conclave, Gabe Cryder and Dick Smart in particular, to hasten to organize a force for a movement against the outlaws.

The men selected were to leave the Gulch secretly, if they could, and to rendezvous at an agreed point, so as to keep the affair as quiet as possible.

"In business of this kind," said Slevin, "I would prefer not to let my left hand know what my right hand doeth; but that is out of the question when we have to raise an army, and the next best thing to entire secrecy is quick work. We must start as soon as possible, and strike at once."

Quick work was done, and within a short time a strong body of resolute and well-armed men assembled at the appointed place.

Thither Sam Slevin brought Bill the Butcher, whom he had held in close custody since his capture, and whom he commanded, under pain of instant death, to conduct the party at once to the camp of the robbers.

For this purpose the prisoner was allowed a reasonable freedom of action, but was so closely watched and covered, that there was no chance for him to escape or play false.

Though they had got a pretty early start, the distance to be traveled was considerable, and the route was so difficult that it was not until late in the afternoon when the forced guide announced the approach of the expedition to the region in which they might expect to find the robbers.

Caution and silence were at once enjoined upon the command, and the advance was made in military fashion under the orders of Silver Sam.

They soon came to a camp, but it was a deserted one, and the evidence was that it was merely a temporary stopping-place, and had not been occupied since the previous night.

But it was something to find out where the enemy had been, and even a deserted camp was an encouraging symptom of progress.

Bill the Butcher was ordered to conduct the party immediately, as time was pressing, to the place where they would be most likely to find the tribe of Aaron, and was reminded that his life depended on the straightness and honesty of his actions.

"I'm doin' the best I ken, boss," replied the captive, who was by that time quite broken in spirit.

"It looks as if I'm bound to lose every time, no matter how well I call the turn. If you fellows let me go, Bob Strahan and his gang will be sure to git me fur goin' back on 'em, and poor Bill is in a hole."

"That's where you deserve to be," said Slevin. "But we will take care of you if you go straight now, and that's what you've got to do, or off comes your head."

"That's what I'm tryin' to do, boss."

"Go ahead, then, and remember that this time we want you to take us to the place where those men are, not to the place where they are not."

"Like as not, as they must be kinder expectin' the kentry to rise ag'inst 'em, they've gone to the hill they call the Fort; but you don't stand no show to git at 'em thar."

"Leave us alone for that. Only show us to the Fort, and be quick about it."

A brisk tramp among the hills brought the expedition in sight of a peculiar elevation at the head of a valley.

The valley was broad, not deep, and heavily timbered.

It narrowed toward the upper end, where it terminated in the elevation alluded to—a nearly precipitous hill of rock, a hundred feet or so in height, flat at the top, or apparently flat, to the extent of perhaps an acre, and backed by an inaccessible mountain.

There was no chance for horses to ascend the elevation, and only one point where men could climb, and that so difficult that one man at the top would be as good as a regiment.

It was at once agreed by the leaders of the expedition that the Fort was impregnable, as far as they could decide upon a hasty observation.

"Now that we know where they ought to be," said Silver Sam, "it remains to be seen if they are there."

As there was not much daylight left, what was to be done must be done quickly.

Sam Slevin directed the advance of the party, though there were none of them who believed that they needed any direction.

They moved forward from tree to tree, keeping themselves carefully covered as they approached the Fort.

Bill the Butcher, under the special care of the leader, was forced to the front for the purpose of showing where and how the tribe of Aaron reached the top of the elevation.

"By the way, Bill," said Silver Sam, as they halted for a moment behind a safe cover, "where do those friends of yours keep their horses? Of course they can't get them up the rock there, and they must hide them somewhere. Where is the hiding-place?"

"T'other side of the hill," answered the prisoner a little vaguely, pointing toward the head of the valley. "Must be a mile or so from here. Say, boss, I don't keer to git so cluss. Mayn't I kinder hang back here?"

He was not permitted to hang back, but compelled to push forward with the rest.

The object of the movement was to discover the presence of the enemy.

It was discovered.

From the summit of the hill was suddenly sent a volley of rifle-shots, and there was one casualty in the ranks of the expedition.

The casualty was the loss of Bill the Butcher, who was shot through the brain, and fell dead without a word or a struggle.

No doubt he had been seen by the robbers and spotted as a traitor, and the main object of the volley was to make an end of him.

As there was no person visible on the summit of the hill, the fire could not be effectively returned.

So the men from Cranch's Gulch, keeping their cover carefully, retired for consultation.

As darkness was about to set in, and it was impossible to scale the rock, it was useless to think of attempting anything until the next day further than the task of keeping the enemy where they were.

A camp was made, and guards were set about the rock, mainly at the one point that was practicable for ascent or descent.

The night passed quietly and peacefully, neither side attempting to molest the other.

When morning came the situation was equally devoid of excitement.

It looked as if the robbers were satisfied with having executed their vengeance upon Bill the Butcher, and were not disposed to be aggressive.

An attempt was made to draw their fire and find out where and how they were posted; but it resulted in failure.

The hill was as quiet as if its murderous occupants had taken themselves off to the uttermost ends of the earth.

Silver Sam and his friends fretted under their forced inaction, and it was unanimously agreed among them that something must be done.

What the something was to be was a point not so easily settled.

The easiest way, and perhaps the surest, was to besiege the Fort, and keep the robbers where they were until starvation should compel their surrender.

But that was too tedious a plan to suit the temper of the Gulchers, and the fact remained that the siege could be kept up while other operations were attempted.

It was Old Gabe who first suggested something practicable.

He discovered that it was possible to climb a steep hill at the right of the Fort, which would command a view of the robbers' position at rather long rifle-range.

It was not supposed that the enemy could be extensively annoyed from that height; but there might at least be an opportunity to acquire some useful information.

Two active and enterprising young men hastened to try this project.

It was no easy matter to ascend the height pointed out by Old Gabe; but they succeeded after some difficult and dangerous climbing, and their report was eagerly awaited by their friends who had followed them.

As soon as they had got their breath they announced an astonishing discovery.

There was nobody in sight on the summit of the elevation that had been occupied by the robbers, and they were quite sure that nobody was there.

Instantly there was a race for the foot of the rock which was called the Fort.

Old Gabe, who happened to be nearest, was the first to reach it; but Sam Slevin claimed precedence as the younger and more active man, and was the first at the top, no person opposing his ascent.

The others followed him as rapidly as they could climb, and the story of the scouts on the adjacent height was at once confirmed.

That the robbers had been there, and probably in full force, was easily seen, as the evidences of recent occupation were plentiful; but what had become of them?

This question, also, was easily answered.

A hole in the rock that backed the plateau showed how and whither they had stolen away.

The hole was something of a cavern at the entrance, but soon decreased to a rough and irregular tunnel into which a man could conveniently crawl.

Sam Slevin was white with rage.

"That infernal scoundrel of a spy deserved death," said he. "If he knew of this trick, and I have no doubt he did, it was we who should have killed him, instead of his fellow-rascals. I wish I had the hanging of him right now."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN ASTONISHER FOR THE GULCH.

AFTER the second attack upon the Cranch's Gulch stage, Bob Strahan had his own way with his followers.

In fact, he had them just where he wanted them.

Under his guidance and inducement they had been compelled to commit themselves to the most dastardly and murderous outrage that had occurred in that region within the memory of any white man.

It is quite probable that they had not intended to carry the affair so far; but, when they had got into it, they could only get out by going through.

They went through, and the result frightened them, which was exactly what Bob Strahan wanted.

Even Sheeny Aaron, with his notorious cowardice and fondness for keeping his precious carcass out of danger, had been pulled into that pit.

Thereafter they were outlaws, with no chance to be anything else.

Every man's hand would be against them, and their hands must be against every man.

That this was the situation of affairs was a fact which their leader pointedly impressed upon them, and they found the picture a gloomy one.

But he was sanguine in showing them the silver lining of the cloud—a lining of bars of silver bullion, which they secreted until they could

get a chance to turn their hard-earned property into money.

What they had got, he told them, was only an earnest of what they were to get, as they had completely terrorized the people at the Gulch, who would be glad to pay them a subsidy to secure immunity from further depredations.

At the same time it was quite possible that a vigorous attempt might be made to capture them, and they must be on their guard, prepared for any emergency.

Therefore they were wise in time, establishing themselves on the elevation which they had previously selected as a safe refuge in time of trouble, and which was known to them as the Fort.

As Bill the Butcher did not "show up" when he was expected to, they were a little more on the alert than they would otherwise have been.

They did not fail to have scouts abroad, and thus they were speedily informed of the approach of the invading force, for which they were fully prepared.

"We've got them now just where we want them!" shouted Strahan. "The galoots of the Gulch will have a healthy old time hangin' this crowd."

When Bill the Butcher was discovered among the invaders, the wrath of the tribe of Aaron rose to the boiling point.

He was accused of having betrayed his comrades, and Strahan ordered that he should be shot down at the first chance.

"Mebbe he was cotched and driv' to it," suggested Muley Mike.

"Durn a skunk who would let himself be driv' to it! He won't get another chance to go back on this crowd."

When the spy had been made an end of, and the Gulch men, without making any effort to force the fighting, seemed to settle down to a siege of the hill, Strahan was in high glee.

"Now," he declared, "we will teach them a lesson which they won't forget in a hurry. We will make them the sickest lot of durned fools who ever went out to shear a wolf."

When he unfolded his plan to his comrades, they were nearly as exultant as he was.

It was audacious in the extreme, but promised to be reasonably safe as well as successful.

At the same time it would bind the tribe of Aaron yet more strongly to the criminal career which they had then fully embraced.

They waited with equanimity until signs of coming day began to be visible in the eastern sky.

Then they entered the hole in the rock that backed the plateau, and emerged on the other side of the hill.

It was dawn when they reached the glen in which their horses were concealed.

There they mounted, and rode rapidly toward Cranch's Gulch.

All but Sheeny Aaron, who protested that he would not be drawn any further into their criminal schemes.

He was willing to share the fruits of their villainy, but not its dangers.

Bob Strahan bestowed upon him a curse and a kick as a reward for his cowardice, and left him behind.

Thus it happened that "Linden saw another sight."

In other words, Cranch's Gulch received an astonisher which it was not likely soon to forget.

It was not yet noon, and the men in the mine and the reducing works had not suspended operations for dinner, and a number of the most active citizens had gone to hunt the robbers, and a period of unusual quiet prevailed in the camp.

In the saloons a few loungers were listlessly discussing the recent exciting events, and speculating on the chances of the success or failure of the last expedition.

The only unanimous agreement was upon the point that Cranch's Gulch was doomed unless an end could be made of the marauders.

Suddenly the scene changed, and the camp fell into a state of collapse.

In the absence of the hunters their home was harried by the hunted.

Right into Cranch's Gulch came at clattering gallop a party of desperadoes armed with rifles and revolvers which they showed a disposition to use in a free and reckless manner.

Hardly was their presence discovered, when the camp was in their possession and at their mercy.

Men who were stationed in the middle of the street kept the people within doors by firing at every head that showed itself, while the rest of the band proceeded systematically, and as if upon a pre-arranged plan, to plunder and ravage the camp.

The few who were willing and anxious to resist the invaders were unable to act, as it was impossible for them to get together and organize.

All was over in a very short time, and yet in that brief period much damage was done.

The Spread Eagle and two other saloons were gutted; the general store was ransacked, and much of the stock was ruined; several money drawers were emptied; the mine office of Cryder & Co. was plundered of its valuables and

set on fire, and fire was started in a shanty at the other end of the street.

Then the raiders, loaded with as much as they cared to carry, fired a parting volley, gave a parting whoop, and clattered away as they had come.

As soon as they were out of sight the collapsed Gulchers began to crawl forth to vent their rage and clamor for revenge.

But they were obliged to go to work, before they could do anything else, to save the camp from a general conflagration.

The mine office was speedily consumed; but, by strenuous efforts, the fire was prevented from spreading, only a few shanties being destroyed.

Then the able-bodied and enterprising men who remained in the Gulch, believing themselves able to cope with the marauders on a fair footing, hastily organized for that purpose.

As soon as possible nearly two dozen mounted men set out on the trail of the robbers, determined to wipe out in blood the insult and injury which had been so unexpectedly put upon Cranch's Gulch.

But Bob Strahan and his riders, owing to the time required for extinguishing the conflagration, had a long start of their pursuers.

They were making good time toward their hiding-place in the hills, and had experienced only one brief delay, which was caused by a private enterprise on the part of their leader.

Mollie Cryder had wandered up the valley that beautiful summer morning, and Crazy Kate, believing that there was no possible danger, had not insisted upon accompanying her.

The girl heard the noise of distant firing in the direction of the Gulch, but gave no heed to it, supposing that the camp was enjoying one of its periodical jamborees, though it was early in the day for such amusements.

Having delighted herself with a pleasant ramble, she was about to return to her home, when she was startled by the sight of smoke and flame down the valley.

She halted for a few minutes, to locate the fire and consider its cause; but no suspicion dawned upon her mind that the camp might have been raided.

The sight of the fire stirred her up, however, and she quickened her steps toward home.

The clattering of horses' hoofs startled her again, and directly a body of men came in sight, riding up the valley at a gallop.

She was seen by them quite as soon as she saw them, and was recognized at once by Bob Strahan, who was at the head of the party.

He had good reason to know her, as he had got more than one good view of her near Jimtown, and had attacked her father's house to get possession of her.

It was one of his pet schemes to satisfy his grudge against Old Gabe by carrying off his daughter.

He saw a fine opportunity to execute that scheme, and hastened to take advantage of it.

"I want that girl!" he shouted, to his followers. "Ride around there, some of you, and head her off!"

"Don't fly to pieces, old man," replied Muley Mike. "We hain't got no time fur such foolishness."

"Why not?"

"Them galoots at the Gulch will be pickin' up and chasin' us."

"Not while they've got fire to fight. Don't be such a coward, Mike. I have never pulled you into a hole yet, and I ain't likely to. Help me to catch that girl, and then you may go ahead as fast as you want to."

It was an easy job, and was soon done.

Mollie Cryder, knowing that she could not pass the mounted party, attempted to run up the slope and escape into the hills; but the horsemen were too quick for her.

The appearance of the men had told her that something was wrong, and she had instantly connected them with the shooting and the fire at the Gulch.

When they started to pursue her, her worst apprehensions were realized.

She was quickly run down, and found herself in the power of a man whom she had good cause to know and to fear.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A FIGHT IN THE FOREST.

SILVER SAM and his friends did not waste many words or much time in useless rage.

The robbers had escaped from their clutches, and the next thing in order was to find their trail and follow them.

As they could only have escaped by the hole in the hill, it was in that direction that pursuit must be made, and the Gulchers were quick to dive into the cavern.

Not a little nerve was required for this sort of pursuit, as it was quite possible that the fugitives might have established themselves at a short distance from the entrance, where they would have a decided advantage over their adversaries.

But this consideration did not hinder the advance of pursuers, all of whom would have plunged in after Silver Sam, if he had not ordered that but one man should accompany him.

He found the natural tunnel a long and intricate affair, and at one point it was entirely blocked up by broken rock, as if to induce the belief that it ended there.

But Silver Sam was not to be deceived by such a device as that.

As the fugitives were not there, they must be beyond the blockade, and where one had gone another could go.

With the assistance of his companion he pulled away the broken rock, and they went on, emerging at the other side of the hill.

Silver Sam's quick glance took in the situation at once.

"That spy told me," he said, "that their horses were hid on the other side of the hill, and this is the other side. It would have been a bright move if some of us had come around and gobbled them up. Now, of course, the scamps have got them and gone off."

He directed his companion to crawl back through the tunnel as speedily as possible, and to notify the rest of the party to mount and join him on the other side of the hill, and it would doubtless be easy for them to find the passage through which the robbers had taken their horses.

He scrambled down the side of the hill to the valley below, and soon discovered the glen in which the tribe of Aaron had concealed their horses.

The horses were gone, and of course their owners had gone with them.

They had left plenty of signs to show that they had recently been there, and the direction they had taken could easily be told by the plain trail they had left.

Silver Sam could only wait impatiently for the arrival of his friends, and that was a matter of time, as it was no quick job to crawl back through the tunnel, and then to find the passage they wanted, and to reach the far side of the hill by a roundabout route.

When they finally came up, their course was already decided for them, and the Gulchers started immediately on the trail of the robbers.

It was an easy trail to follow, and they moved forward at a rapid rate, though it was clear to them that the men they were pursuing had traveled yet more swiftly.

They had got scarcely a mile from the starting-point when one of the men suddenly darted off to the right of the trail, urging his horse to a run.

"Halt, there, or I'll fire!" he ordered, as he dashed through the forest.

Then came the ringing report of a rifle-shot, followed by a yell.

His comrades, glancing immediately in the direction he was taking, had already caught sight of the skulking form of a man on foot, who was endeavoring to get out of the way of the party.

The yell that followed the report of the pistol told of the idle success of the endeavor, and then the Gulcher who had gone in pursuit of him caught him and brought him into the trail.

The skulker proved to be no less important a personage than Sheeny Aaron.

He was recognized by most of the men from Cranch's Gulch, and all of them were rejoiced at his capture.

For his part, he was such a picture of abject terror and misery, that one who was not acquainted with his iniquities might have been disposed to pity him.

But there was not a grain of pity in the breasts of his captors.

"Where are the rest of them?" sternly demanded Sam Slevin.

"The rest of, what?" tremblingly answered Aaron.

"The rest of your infernal gang of robbers and murderers."

Sheeny Aaron protested that he had nothing to do with any robbers and murderers, but was a peaceable man, trying hard to make an honest living.

"Cut that short!" sternly ordered the leader of the Gulchers. "We know that you were with the gang when they last robbed the stage, and that they passed here this morning. What has become of them?"

The Jew went on to declare, most pitifully and with many solemn asseverations, that he had never had anything to do with Bob Strahan and his gang except upon compulsion, and that he had been beaten by them that morning because he tried to escape from them, after refusing to follow them into any further wickedness.

"You know their plans, then. Speak quick. We have no time to fool with you. Where have they gone to?"

"Ash I hope for mershy, dey've gone to Cranch's Gulch."

The audacious scheme of the outlaws was at once evident to their enemies.

They had determined to make a brilliant countermove—to strike at the Gulch while it was comparatively defenseless.

Silver Sam turned yet whiter with rage than when he discovered the escape of the robbers from the hill.

He was not the only one whose wrath was at

a white heat, and the air might well have turned blue with the curses of the party.

All their plans, admirably laid as they were, had been met and defeated, and this last blow was the worst.

"Come on!" hoarsely cried the leader. "We will be too late to help our friends, but we can hurt those infernal villains before we are through with them!"

"How will we take this skunk?" inquired the Gulcher who had captured the Jew.

"Take him? Take nothing! We have fooled with him too long. String him up!"

A more welcome order could not have been given.

A dozen pairs of hands hastened to lay hold of the captive, whose villainy, as was well known, was never restrained but by his cowardice.

His yells and screams and protestations and abject entreaties for mercy were all unheeded.

Within five minutes Sheeny Aaron, bound hand and foot, was dangling at the end of a rope from a branch of a tree.

Having thus executed an act of justice which they knew would be generally approved, the party rode on at as rapid a gait as would allow them to keep the trail.

"Hold on!" shouted Dick Smart, when they had gone a few miles further.

The gait was moderated to hear what he had to say.

"If we want to go straight to the Gulch," he said, "we can do better than follow this trail. It would take us there; but I know a way to cut off several miles."

"That is the way we want," replied Sam Slevin. "Put us into it, Dick, and pull us through as quick as you can."

Dick Smart took the lead, and at once turned aside into the forest.

The trail ran along the base of a range of hills, and the new guide seemed to be riding direct at the range.

But he soon struck a pass between two of the hills, which, though narrow and obscure, was not difficult, and they threaded it at a gallop.

Being no longer subjected to the necessity of watching and keeping a trail, but led by a man who knew exactly the course he wished to take, the party put their horses to the greatest possible speed, and made rapid progress toward Cranch's Gulch.

They had traveled many miles further, and the day was drawing to a close, while at the same time they were nearing their destination, when they met the enemy.

It was a meeting that was quite unexpected on both sides.

The tribe of Aaron, after leaving the Gulch, had struck off from the valley road, avoiding the trail which they had made as they came in, for the very good reason that their pursuers might be expected to follow it in the hope of overtaking them.

Thus, as it happened, the short cut taken by Dick Smart brought his party face to face with the returning raiders.

Both parties were just then passing through a somewhat marshy piece of forest, where their horses' hoofs sunk into the soft earth without a sound, and each caught sight of the other at the same instant.

Greatly as they were surprised by the meeting, each party recognized the other at once, and a brisk battle began.

It was more than brisk, soon getting to be as hot and exciting a contest as the number of the combatants and the nature of the ground would allow.

Sam Slevin's plan of fighting would have been to dismount his men and advance under cover of the trees; but the unexpectedness of the meeting prevented him from deploying his forces as he wished to, and both sides were hotly engaged, helter-skelter, hammer and tongs, almost before they knew what they were about.

In this onset the men of Cranch's Gulch had a decided advantage.

They knew what they wanted to do, and had nothing to incumber them, while the others were uncertain at first whether to fight or to fly, and were bothered by the plunder with which they were loaded.

Whatever their intentions may have been, and in spite of the absence of their leader, they were bound to accept the fight that was forced upon them.

Sam Slevin was wild to avenge the failures and losses of the past, and Grizzly Gabe and Henry Hinton were hot in their desire to wipe out the marauders who had so wantonly added murder to robbery.

Their followers, quickly perceiving that the Gulch had been raided in their absence, fairly flew at the throats of the insolent foe.

So the forest rung with reports of rifle and pistol shots, and bullets flew thick and fast, and yells and curses told of the deadly work that was done as dusk came on.

It was not surprising that the tribe of Aaron, disorganized and demoralized as they were, failed to stick together.

Some of them, especially those who carried the most valuable and portable plunder, began

to abandon their comrades and seek their own safety in flight.

The defection spread as soon as it was discovered, and speedily there was a panic followed by a stampede.

Then there was a mad race in every direction after the fugitives, who were shot down as fast as they could be overtaken.

Only a few escaped in the darkness that shortly settled down upon the forest, and those who were taken alive were immediately hung to the most convenient tree.

One man was spared, and he was wounded.

During the fight nothing had been seen of Bob Strahan, though every Gulcher who knew him had eagerly looked for him, and nobody supposed that he would be a skulker if he were present.

The conclusion was that he was not there, and after the heat of the combat was over all were anxious to know what had become of him.

The wounded man was spared for the purpose of getting this information, and he gave it freely.

Bob Strahan had "caught a girl" near the head of the valley that led into Cranch's Gulch, and had carried her off alone, promising to join his comrades at one of their hiding-places in the hills.

A brief description of the locality and the fair captive made Grizzly Gabe's face turn white with rage and fear.

With a terrible oath he jumped on his horse, and dashed away through the forest, followed by Henry Hinton.

Sam Slevin, after giving the rest of the party directions for attending to such matters as needed attention, told them to bring the prisoners on to the Gulch, and dashed away after the two friends.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MAN AND THE LOCKET.

As soon as Bob Strahan, like a hound after a hare, had overtaken Mollie Cryder, he jumped from his horse and seized her.

Several of the gang were near him; but he had no further use for their services at that moment.

"You may go on now," he said to Muley Mike, "as fast and as far as you please. If I don't catch up with you, I will meet you at the hole this side of Blue Hill."

The poor girl had fainted.

Though she was brave enough, skillful in the use of a revolver, and of late accustomed to scenes of violence and excitement, her nerves were not proof against sudden fright.

Her pursuit and capture, coupled with her recognition of the man who had persecuted her so persistently near Jintown, and who had suddenly appeared before her when she believed herself to be entirely safe, were too much for her strength.

Bob Strahan gazed at her pale face and inanimate form for a few moments, gloating over her as if he had secured a prize of far greater value than the Cranch's Gulch silver.

Then he lifted her gently, carefully placed her on his saddle-bow, and climbed into the saddle, arranging his burden so that he could hold her securely and without serious discomfort to her.

His comrades, who had impatiently endured the brief delay, had taken advantage of the permission he gave them to ride as fast and as far as they pleased, and were already out of sight.

He rode slowly up the valley, not in the road which they had taken, but along the slope and near the foot of the hills.

He had no intention of following them, and at the same time it was necessary to keep out of the way of pursuers who might come from the Gulch, and to avoid the party that might return on the trail of the marauders.

Just then he was not disposed to take any risks, as he was determined to retain the valuable prize he had secured.

Therefore he turned to the left when he had reached the head of the valley, and rode more rapidly until he passed into an opening between two hills.

As yet Mollie Cryder had not recovered from her swoon, and was a helpless, lifeless burden.

His dark face turned gray, and his brows were drawn down heavily, as it seemed possible that she might never open her eyes and breathe again.

What had come over the man that had caused him to grow so tender and to be so easily affected?

It was probably the more rapid riding over rougher ground that at last awoke her sleeping senses and made her stir and start.

When she opened her eyes, and began to gain an idea of her position, she uttered a faint cry of horror.

Bob Strahan looked down at her, and suddenly his dark face grew grayer than before, and his frown was darker and stranger.

He echoed her cry of horror with a louder and hoarser cry of his own.

She began to struggle, and her struggles were very weak; but he did not attempt to restrain her.

The strong man who held her—murderer, lib-

ertine, thorough-paced scoundrel as he was—trembled at the sight of her.

Or, was it at the sight of something about her?

He halted in the shade of some tall trees in the valley which he had entered, gently lowered his burden to the ground, and dismounted there, letting his horse stray.

Though he was trembling with excitement, he did not fail to retain his grasp of one of her wrists until he was on the ground before her.

Then he let her go, but she made no attempt to escape.

There was something in his mien, his look, his entire manner and bearing, that fascinated her and held her to the spot.

It was then about the middle of the afternoon, and the sky was clear and the sun was shining in spots through the foliage of the big trees, casting flecks of gold on the leaves and grass below.

One bunch of his bright arrows struck the face and breast of Mollie Cryder as she stood there, in such wondering astonishment that she was nearly dazed.

The light shone on a locket that hung from her neck on the outside of her dress.

It was at this that the desperado's strange and startled gaze was directed.

"What is that?" he demanded, standing at a little distance from her, speaking hoarsely and almost in a whisper, and pointing with his outstretched hand at her breast.

He was trembling as he spoke, and his eyes were spread, and his look was that of one who might have seen a ghost.

She was no longer afraid of him, astonished having got the better of her fear.

"What do you mean?" she asked, not fearfully, but in wonder.

"What is that—that—gold?"

"Do you mean this locket? It was given to me. My father found it on a dead man."

"A dead man? Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. My father told me that, and so did Henry Hinton."

"A dead man? Where?"

His voice was hoarser than before, and his look was yet wilder.

"At a log house down in the valley," answered Mollie. "It was the first time they came to Cranch's Gulch. They found a dead man in that house. He had been murdered, and the murderer had run away. He was my dear and only brother. The murderer had robbed him of everything but this locket, which was hung from around his neck, and it was open. There is a picture of a woman in the locket. I will show it to you."

Strahan had not changed his attitude, his staring gaze, his look of expectant fear.

But, when she took the locket in her hand, as if to open it, he made a repellent gesture, muttering something that she did not understand.

She pressed the spring, and the case flew open, the sun's rays falling upon the face of a woman.

A hoarse cry of terror burst from his lips, and he covered his face with his hands, shaking as if with an ague-fit.

Mollie looked at him in amazement.

No longer fearing him, she began to pity him, and spoke to him gently and kindly.

His paroxysm soon passed, and he looked like a worn and broken man as he removed his hands from his face.

"Was he your brother?" he asked in a husky whisper. "The dead man—was he your brother, too?"

"He was my brother," answered Mollie. "I keep this locket in remembrance of him, and of his murderer."

"The woman—the picture—was she your mother?"

"She was not my mother; but she was somebody's mother, I suppose. What is the matter, sir? Why do you—"

"Put it up!" he shouted, his face suddenly turning purple. "Go away! Run as fast as you can run! Leave me, I say, before I kill you or do you worse harm! Go!"

Thoroughly frightened then, and believing that she had a madman to deal with, she took him at his word, and ran from him as fast as her trembling limbs would bear her.

She naturally ran out of the pass; but something stronger than fear compelled her to cast a hasty glance backward.

The man was half seated on the ground, or possibly on his knees, and his face was covered by his hands.

No longer afraid, and pitying him in spite of herself, she picked her way more slowly and carefully over the rough ground and toward the valley that led to the Gulch.

She had been insensible when she was carried to the pass, and she did not know where she was when she issued from it; but her flight from the late scene of danger necessarily took her down the slope, and when she reached the head of the valley she recognized the locality.

By this time she had quite regained her senses, and was free to wonder at the man who had captured her and at his strange behavior.

She had so thoroughly recovered her self-pos-

session, that she was not frightened when she heard the rapid approach of horses below, but quietly concealed herself until they came in view.

Then she perceived that they were friends, and boldly walked forward until she met them.

No more fire or smoke was visible at the Gulch, and she wondered what had started a party of mounted men from there, and why they were in such a hurry.

That information she quickly gained.

They hailed her, calling her by name, and asked her if she had seen any people pass that way lately.

She was then so calm and natural that she had the appearance of having merely taken a ramble for pleasure, and there was nothing to suggest the exciting scenes through which she had just passed.

On her part, for reasons which she might not easily have explained, she made no allusion to her rough experience.

She simply answered the question by stating that she had seen a party of strangers coming rapidly up the valley, and had hid herself until they passed by.

The men from the Gulch spurred forward, and Mollie Cryder quietly walked down the valley to her home.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MOLLIE CRYDER'S QUEER NOTION.

OLD GABE and Henry Hinton put their horses to their utmost speed as they dashed through the forest.

The old man was nearly frantic with rage and fear.

That his daughter should have fallen prey to that murderous scoundrel who had done so much damage—the same villain who had killed poor Golo and nearly worried her to death near Jintown—was to him the most terrible thing that could have happened.

He had lost his wife and his firstborn son; his remaining boy had been foully murdered, and now his only child was torn from him by a most atrocious and remorseless villain.

The great and consuming fear was that he would be too late to rescue or even to find her; that she was already beyond the reach of aid.

His anxiety and excitement were so intense that he could not speak.

The wonder was that he did not go mad.

Henry Hinton was possessed by an almost equal anxiety.

For the first time he fully realized how dear Gabe Cryder's daughter was to him, and knew that the world without her would be worthless for his use.

At the moment he saw but one issue for the calamity—nothing but the satisfaction of a terrible revenge.

So they rode, the old man and the young man, silently and swiftly, tearing through the forest at a reckless pace, until they were halted by a friendly hail.

The next moment they were surrounded by the party from Cranch's Gulch, who were following the trail of the raiders.

Hinton was obliged to speak for his partner and himself, and his sharp questioning brought out the facts as briefly as possible.

The Gulch men told of the raid and their pursuit of the raiders.

"You may go back," said the young man. "That part of the business is ended. We have met the scoundrels, and nearly all of them are dead."

"But where are the rest of the folks?" inquired the leader of the party. "Why were you and the old man scampering off at this rate? What is the matter with him?"

"His daughter—Mollie Cryder," excitedly answered Hinton.

"What is the matter with her?" was the wondering question.

"We took one of the wretches alive, and he told us that Bob Strahan had captured her near the head of the valley, and had carried her off."

"The skunk must have lied. We met her as we came along, and she was all right then. She had been up the valley for a walk, and was going home. We asked her if she had seen the gang that struck the Gulch. She said that she had seen a party of strangers riding by, and had hid herself to keep out of their way. She is all right, I can tell you."

The receipt of this information left the young man incapable of anything but a stare of bewilderment.

But Old Gabe awoke from his stupor, and his face brightened, and a great sigh of relief expressed the satisfaction with which he accepted the strange story.

"Are you quite sure of all that?" he demanded. "Are you sure that it was my girl?"

"Of course we are," answered the man from the Gulch. "Could we make any mistake about Mollie Cryder? Ask the rest of the boys. They will tell you the same."

They all hastened to confirm the statements of their leader.

"It is strange," remarked the old man. "I can't see what that cuss thought he was going to gain by lying to us. Couldn't it have been before she was picked up that you met her?"

"Not a bit of it. No sign of a chance of that. We didn't leave the Gulch until an hour after those scoundrels got off, and the cuss who told you that yarn was miles away when we met the girl. How could he have known anything about her after that, when we were hot on his trail all the time?"

Old Gabe was convinced, and glad to be convinced; but was puzzled, and so was his partner.

They could not imagine what reason the wounded robber could have had for telling such an unnecessary lie.

Sam Slevin overlooked his friends and joined the party while they were discussing this subject.

He was as badly mystified as the others were, and wondered why the prisoner should have told a lie that would surely cause him to be hanged as soon as the truth could be known.

The fact that Bob Strahan had not been seen during the fight in the forest, and in all probability was not there, had given the story an air of truth.

If the story was not true, what had become of Bob Strahan?

These points were discussed in all their bearings, and the tales of the raid on the Gulch and of the adventures of the party that finally struck the marauders were fully told, as the men, all easier in their minds and better satisfied with themselves, rode home at their leisure.

It was agreed that the man who told that outrageous lie about Mollie Cryder deserved hanging, and should be strung up as a warning to all reckless and unnecessary liars.

As they rode down the valley in the early night Gabe Cryder quickened his pace.

He was anxious to get home and make sure that his daughter was there and safe.

Henry Hinton and Silver Sam accompanied him to the cabin which had served as the temporary dwelling-place of his little family since the burning of his frame house.

To the great joy of the three men, Mollie was there, sitting in the lighted room with Crazy Kate, waiting for her father, and busy with her sewing, as calm and undisturbed as if nothing had happened to trouble her.

She greeted her friends gladly, and was eager to know what news they had brought.

They gave her a full history of the movements of the party that had gone in search of the marauders, of the raid on the Gulch, and of the fight that had so nearly wiped out Bob Strahan's gang.

"We cleaned 'em out, Mollie," said the old man. "We made a good endin' of a bad job. But the worst of the business came right then. We were terribly worried about you."

"Why were you worried about me?" she asked demurely.

"Because one of those scamps told us that Bob Strahan had picked you up and carried you off. Harry and I cut out like crazy men, and we were all torn to pieces until we met the boys from the Gulch, who told us that there was nothin' the matter with you."

"There is nothing the matter with me," answered Mollie, as she reddened a little.

"And there hain't been nothin' the matter?"

"Nothing bad," she answered, slightly hesitating.

"Nothin' bad? It was bad enough for us to be told such a rotten lie by that infernal pirate; but you may bet your sweet life that we will make him suffer for it."

Mollie said nothing; but a look of pain crept into her face.

"What's the matter, dearie?" asked the old man. "You look worried. Does anythin' trouble you?"

"Yes, father, I am troubled."

"Tell your dad what it is."

"Please don't hurt the man, father."

"Not hurt him? Why not?"

"Because he told the truth."

"He told the truth? By the jumpin' Jehoshaphat! has the girl gone crazy? There's a big lie out somewhere. Who has told it—the cuss we caught, or the men from the Gulch, or—you?"

"I don't believe that anybody has lied, father."

"But you told the men from the Gulch that you hid when those scoundrels passed up the valley, and that nothing had happened to you."

"That is a mistake, father. I did not tell them that anything had happened to me—that is all. I tried to hide, but was seen and caught, and the man you spoke of carried me away on his horse."

"Carried you away? That murderous villain? And you are here, alive and safe! I don't understand it at all."

"I don't understand it, myself, though I have been thinking it over ever since. I will tell you just how it happened, and I doubt if you can understand it then."

Mollie told the story of her capture, and of the incomprehensible proceedings of her captor, up to her escape and her meeting with the Gulch men as they came up the valley.

"Now you know all about it, father," said she. "Do you understand it now?"

"I don't understand it a bit, and your performance is the strangest part of the whole business."

When you met your friends, why didn't you tell them what had happened? They might have caught the scamp, as he was then not far away."

"But I didn't want him to be caught, father."

"Not want him to be caught? Great Caesar's ghost! Why not?"

"I hardly know. I can't understand it. It was all so strange. Somehow—I can't explain it—I felt sorry for him."

"Sorry for him? Sorry for that villain—that murderer? He killed poor Golo. He has killed, with the help of those other scoundrels, some of the best men of the Gulch. He nearly killed his wife. And yet you say you are sorry for him."

"He murdered his own mother," observed Sam Slevin.

"That he did, and yet this girl is sorry for him. Well, women are the most unaccountable creatures. Sorry for him!"

"I couldn't help it, father. He seemed to be so broken down, that I pitied him."

CHAPTER XXXII.

"HE KILLED MY BOY."

MOLLIE CRYDER'S declaration—not altogether an unblushing one—of sympathy with that scoundrel and assassin, Bob Strahan, at once put her below par in the estimation of those before whom it was uttered.

Her father looked at her coolly, Sam Slevin secretly sneered, and even Crazy Kate vented her displeasure in contemptuous sniffs.

But Henry Hinton, who considered her faultless on general principles, had something to say for her.

The young man was disposed to take a philosophical view of the matter.

"After all," he said, "the fact remains that the man had Miss Mollie in his power, and let her go free and unharmed, and the real question is, why did he do so? As he is a thorough villain and a murderer, fully deserving all the hard names you have given him, it is all the more strange that he should have treated her so liberally and so gently. We know, too, that he said at the old Cut-throat Kingdom that he had a grudge against Uncle Gabe, and that makes the business yet more strange. He wanted to satisfy that grudge by carrying off Mr. Cryder's daughter, and why did he let her go? Either the man was crazy—"

"That won't do," interjected Silver Sam. "Some fools nowadays would have us believe that all murderers are crazy; but we hang them all the same, when we can catch them. His crazy fits don't take the turn of sparing other people's lives and property."

"That is the point I was coming to," remarked Hinton. "Either he was crazy, or something else was the matter with him, and what was it that knocked him over so suddenly? The fit—we may as well call it a fit—came on him at the sight of that locket. It grew worse when Mollie told him what she knew of its history, and he was all broken up when she opened it and showed him the picture."

"It was just that way," eagerly interposed Mollie.

"So it was the locket that broke him up so badly that he let her go. What is the conclusion? That he knew the locket—that he had seen the face before. The man who murdered Mr. Cryder's son, here in the Gulch, robbed him of everything but that locket. I took it from the dead boy, and kept it. The other day Mollie asked me for it, and I let her have it, telling her to be careful of it."

"I am not sure that I see what you are trying to get at," remarked Silver Sam.

"It is plain enough to me, Mr. Slevin. I kept the locket because I hoped with its aid to find the murderer of young Gabe Cryder. The last time Bob Strahan saw that locket, it was in the log-house across the valley, on the breast of the dead boy. When he saw it in Mollie's possession, and knew that the victim over there was her brother, the sight gave him a shock that unsettled him for a while."

"That's it!" exclaimed Old Gabe. "You have hit it this time, Harry. He is the murderer. He killed my boy."

This announcement created a sensation, and no person was more troubled by it than was Mollie Cryder.

But she agreed with her father and Hinton that the man who had carried her off must have been the murderer of her brother.

Silver Sam was a man who was never in a hurry to jump at conclusions.

"I suppose I must admit," said he, "that our young friend is partly right, and that Bob Strahan murdered that poor boy over there. The evidence wouldn't convince a jury strongly enough to convict him; but his agitation over the locket must mean something, and what else can it mean?"

"The locket explains the whole business," remarked Hinton.

"Not quite, my young friend. The question still remains, why did he let Miss Cryder go? Was it because his sensitive soul revolted at murdering two people in the same family, or from harming the sister of a man he had murdered? That is too thin, if you will allow the expression. Is it a bit likely that a man who

had tried to murder his wife, and had succeeded in murdering his mother, not to speak of many other murders, known and unknown, would be bothered by a little thing like that?"

"But he was bothered," insisted Hinton.

"No doubt of that; but what bothered him? It was the locket, you will say. But what was it about the locket that bothered him? Not that he had last seen it on the breast of young Gabe Cryder. Not that he suddenly learned that Miss Mollie was the poor boy's sister. That is not enough for a man of his stamp. It was something more than that, and something outside of that, that knocked him. I am told that the locket was open when you found it on the murdered boy. Why did Strahan, if it was he who killed the lad, leave the locket when he took everything else?"

"That is a question that I have been puzzling over for a long time," said Hinton, "and I must admit, Mr. Slevin, that I don't see any answer to it yet."

"Let it go!" exclaimed Old Gabe. "I don't see that it needs any answer. It is enough for me to know that the black-hearted villain killed my boy, and that I am sure of. I don't care to split hairs over things, or to know what made him do this, that, or the other. I know what he has done, and that is bad enough. A murderer is a murderer, and hanging is too good for that one. I know that I mean to hunt him down, if it takes the last cent of my money, and the last minute of my time on earth!"

On this point Henry Hinton and Sam Slevin agreed with him fully.

"What worries me the most just now," continued the old man, "is to think that Mollie was sorry for that bloodthirsty scoundrel, and didn't want him to be caught, just when there was a good chance to grab him. What on earth could have got hold of the girl, to give her such a notion as that? If she wants to know how much he is worth feelin' sorry for, she ought to hear Kate's story of the way he treated her. She has got to hear it, too."

Crazy Kate, being urged by her friends, and being assured that the narrative would be for Mollie's benefit, went on to tell the sad story of her rough experience with Bob Strahan, assisted by the old man, who had a good remembrance of previous relations of the same tale.

She had met Robert Strahan in western Kansas, shortly after her return from a boarding-school in Illinois.

She was an orphan, and was reputed to be an heiress, although, unfortunately for her, the report was not true, except to the extent of a very few thousand dollars.

Strahan was represented, mainly through his own statements, as being a wealthy land speculator, and his appearance and his expensive habits gave color to the representations.

According to Kate's account, he was then not a bit like the rough and repulsive person who was unpleasantly known to the denizens of Jintown and Cranch's Gulch and the region round about, but a stylish and attractive young gentleman—a fine type of the Western adventurer and hero.

Of course she married him when he asked her to do so. How could she resist him?

Their married life was reasonably smooth and happy for a few weeks, and then the trouble began.

He soon discovered that her fortune was a very small affair, which ran through his hands like water through a sieve.

She soon discovered that his speculation was swindling, and that his business was fraud, if not worse.

Before long it proved to be much worse.

Broken in purse, dissolute in habits, and desperate by disposition and by the pressure of necessity, he went further West, where his only occupation was that of preying upon other people's property.

Those were hard times for Alice Strahan, but worse were to come.

Her husband's frequent and mysterious absences, his rough associates, whose company he forced upon her, and occasional inquiries after him by officers of the law, together with his continued and increasing neglect, filled her life with constant torture.

She was painfully made aware of the fact that he was engaged in lawless and desperate enterprises, and his abominable secrets were a burden to her.

It was yet worse to be often assured that she was a nuisance and a hindrance to him, a drag upon his "business," and a blight upon his prospects, and that he would be glad to be rid of her.

He taunted her with the statement that she had secured him as a husband under false pretenses, though she had never represented herself as wealthy, and all the false pretenses were on his part.

When the end came, it was preluded by a marked change in his demeanor toward her.

She might have known, if she had been older and wiser, that his assumed gentleness and the seeming return of his old love were only intended to lure her on to her destruction.

They were living—if that sort of existence

could be called living—in a remote and almost inaccessible portion of Colorado, when he put in execution his plan for getting rid of her quietly.

He invited her to walk with him, and she was glad to go.

They halted at the edge of a chasm, and then she was suddenly aware of a stunning pain and a fall.

After that she was conscious of nothing for an indefinite period of time.

When she awoke, she found herself at the bottom of the chasm, so badly wounded and bruised and exhausted that there was little life left in her.

But she made a wonderful use of that little, and dragged herself for miles, with intense pain and utter weariness, until she fortunately secured assistance.

She did not tell her story—she could not have told it then if she had wished to—but it was apparent that she was near death's door, and kind people took her to a hospital in Denver.

There she recovered gradually, and was finally discharged as cured.

She knew that her mind had not recovered its balance, and that there was a screw loose somewhere, but she had sense enough to be aware of her condition, and consequently kept out of an insane asylum.

It was while she was in the hospital that she learned of the death of an uncle who had left her quite a nice little sum of money, which she afterward secured, with the aid of a Denver lawyer.

"And my Mollie was sorry for that murderous villain!" exclaimed Old Gabe, when Crazy Kate's story had been told. "I reckon she is satisfied now that he didn't deserve any sympathy."

"I know that, father," replied Mollie. "I am sure that he is a very bad man, and I fear him and hate him. But there was something about him that made me feel sorry for him. I could not help it then, and I can't help it now."

"Well, I feel just sorry enough for him to strangle him to death. He killed my boy, and everything must drop until I can hunt him down."

Sam Slevin wanted to look at the locket, and it was handed to him.

He opened the case, and gazed at the picture long and intently.

"That face reminds me of something," he said musingly. "What is it that it reminds me of? Another face that I have seen somewhere. Of course this is not the same face; but, if it were a dead face, it might have some such a look. But that is only a foolish notion, not worth speaking of."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SEEKING AND FINDING.

GABE CRYDER was as good as his word as regarded a vigorous effort to hunt down the murderer of his son.

As he was always a man of his word, that point is hardly worth mentioning.

This occasion, however, was noteworthy for the entire failure of his efforts.

He let everything else go, as he had said he would, and devoted all his energies to the pursuit of the murderous outlaw.

This he could easily do, as his interests would not suffer in his absence, being in the care of Henry Hinton, who was fully equal to all the demands that could be made upon him.

Henry took the entire charge of the mine, which prospered under his direction, and shipments of silver were resumed when it was believed that the tribe of Aaron had been thoroughly wiped out.

The wounded prisoner who had been brought to the Gulch, and who had not lied about Mollie Cryder's capture, was given his life on the condition that he would disclose the hiding-places of the property that had been taken by the robbers.

He did so, and a good part of the stolen silver was recovered.

Hinton quickly rebuilt the office of the firm, and hurried the building of a house for Gabe Cryder, on the site of the dwelling that was destroyed by fire.

The last mentioned business took him up there frequently at odd hours when he could spare the time, as he wanted to consult with Mollie about the style and arrangements of the new house, as well as to make sure that she did not stray abroad any more and get into trouble.

It is possible that these duties occupied his time to a greater extent than was really necessary, and that his consultations were more frequent and of longer continuance than the business seemed to require.

It might also have been noticed that he took occasion, to hold them in the stillness of evening or during the moonlight hours, and that he was obliged to take Mollie out alone and to hold conversation in sequestered spots.

The nature of his business, and the object of his peculiar manner of conducting it, may easily be guessed at, and the reader shall not be afflicted with any details of courtship.

It is enough to say that pleasure was delightfully combined with business, and that the consultations culminated in the promise of Mollie Cryder to become the wife of Henry Hinton.

While this was going on, Old Gabe was entirely occupied with his pursuit of Bob Strahan.

It was well that the mine was prospering then, as the persistent hunter squandered his money on the pursuit as freely as his time.

He offered a liberal reward for the apprehension of the murderer, and he and the men he employed scoured the country far and near.

Every plain, forest, mountain, hill, canyon, glen and valley was searched, until Old Gabe and his hunters believed that every foot of that region was familiar to them.

In these operations the old man had the efficient aid of Sam Slevin, who searched cities and towns and villages and camps, and no person was more hot and eager in the pursuit than he was.

But all the vigorous and sustained effort resulted in failure.

Twice Bob Strahan was heard of; but, when his pursuers hastened to the spots where they had hoped to find him, he had vanished, and they were unable to strike his trail.

At last there was no longer any trace of him, and no rumor of his presence anywhere.

Then Gabe Cryder returned to Cranch's Gulch, and resumed his usual occupations, abandoning the search for a time.

He renewed his offers of reward, and kept Silver Sam in his employment, waiting until he should hear some news of the missing murderer.

It was then generally believed that Bob Strahan was dead, or had fled far from that portion of the country.

But those who clung to that belief were soon made aware of the fact that he was alive, was still near at hand, and was fully as vicious as ever.

The stage which had resumed its trips, and had made many of them without the least molestation, was again "held up" and plundered, not far from the spot which had witnessed its last disaster.

The driver, who was seated in his place by the express guard, saw a man standing against a tree at the side of the road, holding a gun pointed at the approaching vehicle.

But it was only one man, and he neither fired nor shouted the usual command to halt.

The driver and his companion, growing valorous, ordered the stranger to come forward and throw up his hands.

As he did not obey, they fired at him.

The shots failed to move him, and they emptied the contents of their rifles into him.

As he still held his position, the fact dawned upon their minds that they had been cheated by a dummy, and they began to curse the rascal who had played such a trick upon them.

Then came the dreaded hail, from lips that were unmistakably alive.

"Jump down, and throw up your hands!"

As their unloaded weapons were useless, and the rifle which was then bearing upon them was clearly not held by a dummy, there was nothing for them to do but obey the peremptory order.

In the stage were only two passengers, who made no attempt at resistance, having been cowed as soon as the first shots were fired at the dummy.

Only two robbers were visible, and one of them guarded the driver and expressman, while the other pulled down the express box, and "went through" the passengers.

Both were masked; but it was easy to recognize the tall form and peculiar bearing of Bob Strahan.

A large force concealed in the bushes near by, as afterward reported, existed only in the excited imaginations of the men who peppered the dummy.

When the robbers had got what they wanted, they ordered the driver and expressman to mount to their places and go on with the team, which order was instantly and cheerfully obeyed.

The report of this robbery, when it was brought to Cranch's Gulch, caused great excitement there.

Old Gabe and Silver Sam were wild with rage and mortification when they learned that the man whom they had sought so persistently and so vainly had turned up right under their noses to annoy and defy them.

Another expedition was immediately organized, and again the eager man-hunters searched the wilderness far and wide.

This time they got on the trail of the outlaw, and had good reason to hope that they might overtake and capture him.

As they approached the locality which he was supposed to infest, they separated and spread out, so as to cover as much ground as possible.

In that rough and difficult region the line necessarily became broken up, and the men were more widely separated as they advanced.

Some had got ahead of their comrades, and some had veered to the right or the left to avoid obstructions or search recesses in the hills.

Old Gabe was at the right of the line, and Silver Sam at the left, and each was at a con-

siderable distance from the nearest supporting man.

It was Old Gabe who had the fortune to discover the fugitive.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he was discovered by the fugitive.

Bob Strahan suddenly jumped out from some unknown hiding-place, less than a dozen yards ahead of him.

Gabe Cryder was so startled by the rise and the rush that he lost his presence of mind.

He had not intended to fire at the man if he should meet him; but he did fire, and fired so hastily that the shot was ineffective.

That he should make such a stupid blunder was as great a surprise to him as the unexpected appearance of Bob Strahan.

He was actually flustered, and hesitated as to what he should do.

The delay was fatal to him.

At the report of the shot, and with astonishing quickness, Strahan leaped upon him, grasping him by the throat, and bearing him to the ground.

The force of the onset, and the strength and agility of the younger man, easily overcame Old Gabe, and he was at the mercy of his antagonist, who had at the moment the look and air of a man who had run wild in the woods.

But the wild man was a merciful beast.

Though Old Gabe was overthrown and disarmed, he sustained no injury except such as was necessary to quell voice.

Then his antagonist rose, and permitted him to rise.

"Go away, old man!" ordered Strahan, in a hoarse and suppressed voice.

"Go home! Leave me alone! I know you have hunted me everywhere, and raised the country against me, and now I have caught you, and I only tell you to go. Go home, I say, and leave me alone."

"What do you mean?" feebly asked the bewildered old man, who had expected nothing but instant death.

"I mean that I don't want to hurt you, but am afraid that I might be tempted to."

"Why don't you want to hurt me, when you know that I have been hunting you to hang you?"

"Is it not enough? I murdered your son—do you think I want to kill you?"

"I must draw the line somewhere," added the outlaw, with a wild and discordant laugh.

Then he ran off at the top of his speed, carrying his own rifle and the old man's weapon.

Old Gabe went in search of his comrades, shouting to them, and would have fired a few shots to draw them, if he had not been disarmed.

But some of them had heard the shot he fired at Strahan, and they soon found him.

The agreed signal of three shots brought forward the rest of the party after awhile.

With them came Silver Sam, who anxiously inquired what had happened.

"I have found Bob Strahan," answered the old man—"or he found me."

"Did you kill him?" asked Slevin.

"No—nor did he kill me."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. Far away from here by this time, I reckon."

"You found him, and you let him go?"

"I didn't say that. It was he who let me go."

"I don't understand you, uncle Gabe."

"I ain't sure that I understand myself. It's all so strange. I don't want to talk about it now. If any of you want to go on and hunt him, hunt away. I'm done. I shall never hunt him again. I'm going home."

Home he did go, and the rest of the party wonderingly accompanied him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE QUESTION ANSWERED.

THEREAFTER there was no further search made for the fugitive outlaw, except by Silver Sam, who was not to be easily balked, and who had a strong professional interest in the pursuit.

But he made no talk about the quiet search in which he was engaged, and never mentioned it to Old Gabe, who was so evidently determined to have nothing more to do with the matter.

The old man had withdrawn his offers of reward, and had settled down to his usual occupation, to which he devoted himself more laboriously and assiduously than ever.

He was slow to tell his story, and would doubtless have preferred to hint at it, rather than to state the details outright.

But it was finally drawn from him in full, one evening at his new house, when Silver Sam was there, with Henry Hinton, and Mollie and Crazy Kate.

It was pulled out of him by piecemeal, and he told it with reluctance and a degree of shamefacedness.

It evidently fretted him to feel that he had been so startled and flustered that he was easily worsted, and there was another sort of feeling which he did not care to acknowledge or to analyze.

"So our young friend Hinton was right after all," observed Silver Sam. "The scoundrel did

murder your boy, Uncle Gabe, and had conscientious scruples about murdering two people in the same family. It is queer; but I suppose we must give in that it is true. I would never have believed that such a black-hearted villain could have even that much of tender or sentimental feeling; but we live and learn. He had to draw the line somewhere, as he said, and he drew it at the old man."

"He had already drawn it at Mollie," remarked Hinton. "He let her go, and he knew that Uncle Gabe was her father, as well as the father of the boy he had killed."

"I understand that, my young friend, and have swallowed it right down. As I put the thing up now, the locket don't cut any figure in the case, except that it gave Miss Mollie a chance to tell him that she was the sister of the dead boy. Then the brute weakened."

"That is reasonable enough," answered Hinton.

"Yes, as far as it goes. But it don't go far enough to suit me. It was the locket itself, if I remember right, that had such a crushing effect upon him—that fairly knocked him out. Why was that?"

"Because he had seen the locket on the breast of the boy he murdered."

"That is milk for babes, and I want something stronger. It was the face in the locket that finally knocked over this very tender-hearted villain. I want to know what there was about that face to worry him. Why did he leave the locket over there, on the dead boy's breast? Is that question answered yet?"

"I am obliged to admit that it is not."

"It is a question that you asked, my young friend, some time ago, and you have not found an answer to it yet. Until it can be answered, my doubts will not be cleared up, and I shall not believe very strongly in that fellow's compunctions of conscience. But, supposing that he did have a tender feeling toward the rest of the family because he had murdered young Gabe Cryder. Does that make him any less guilty, or any less deserving of punishment? Because he refrained from committing two more murders, should we refuse to hang him for the murders he did commit? No judge or jury could be found who would say so, and I know that if I ever get a shy at him I shall be careful not to miss him."

Silver Sam's arguments tended to unsettle the opinions of more than one of his auditors, and thereafter Henry Hinton frequently found himself puzzling over the question, why did the murderer of young Gabe Cryder leave that locket on his victim?

The question was soon to be answered.

Old Gabe was seated in the new office of the mine with his young partner, when a stranger stepped in.

The stranger was an elderly gentleman, but well preserved, with the appearance and demeanor of a solid and substantial citizen.

He advanced smilingly, and held out his hand to the old man.

"Is this Gabe Cryder?" he asked. "Yes, I know it is. Changed, as the rest of us have changed, but the same Old Gabe whom we used to call Old Tough and Trusty."

The old man took the hand that was offered him; but there was a puzzled look on his face.

"Seems like I ought to know you," said he; "but I can't appear to place you. It must be somethin' in old times that you remind me of."

"Old times it is, my friend. It must be some twenty-five years since I last saw you, and I might never have met you again, if I hadn't heard that you had made a big strike out here in the silver line. I came many miles out of my way to congratulate you on your good luck, and to wish it may stick to you. If there is any man who deserves good luck, it is Old Gabe Cryder."

"Thank you, sir. The luck really is good, and I hope it will stick, as it seems to me that I've had my share of bad luck."

"You don't seem to know me yet, old friend. My name is Eugene Cabanet."

The old man shook his head, as if the news brought nothing to him.

"Go 'way back before the war. Don't you remember a party of five young fellows whose guide you were on a long hunting-trip? A rough but jolly time we had, dodging the Crows and the 'Rapahoes. There were two Englishmen in the party, and I was the St. Louis man who brought them to you. I had a token from Jim Beckwourth."

"I know you now, God bless you!" exclaimed the old man, as he grasped his visitor's hand again.

Then a sudden cloud came over his face, and his eyes dropped.

"Yes, I remember that party well," he said, "and I have good cause to remember it. We had a fine time while we were out, Mr. Cabanet, though you were a bad set to manage; but it was no sort of a good time for me when I came home. You and your friends left mighty sudden."

"That wasn't our fault," replied the other. "It was Strahan's doing."

The old man stepped back quickly, and stared at his visitor.

"Strahan!" he exclaimed. "What Strahan?"

"One of the Englishmen. Have you forgotten him?"

"I believe I had forgotten the names of all of you. You had so many by-names."

"You had cause to remember Strahan. But, as you had lost all of the names, perhaps you didn't know. I don't need to be delicate about it, I hope. You must have got over that trouble before this. It was Strahan who—"

"Carried off my wife?" broke in the old man.

"Yes, I have got over that. Are you sure that the name was Strahan?"

"Of course I am. Could I forget the scoundrel? The rest of us were ashamed to face you, after what one of the party had done, and we thought we had better follow him, and persuade him to come back, or fix up the matter somehow. But he had got too much the start of us, and was hundreds of miles from where we left you when we finally caught up with him."

"Do you know what became of him?"

"He settled in Nebraska, I believe, and bought a big stock-farm there. He married the woman, though I don't suppose the marriage was legal. It did not succeed in making her an honest woman, anyhow, as she was not inclined to be honest. Pardon me, old friend; but I am simply telling you the truth."

"Go on," said Old Gabe. "I wish I could stand everything as easy as I can stand that."

"She worried him terribly, I am told, by her goings on, and at last ran off with another man. Then he sold out his property in Nebraska, or wherever it was, and was said to have gone back to England. That is all that I know about them."

"What became of my son—the child she carried away when she left me?"

"I know nothing of the child. If he lived, I suppose he went off with his mother, and is not likely to have come to any good."

"He has been here," moaned Old Gabe, and he looked a picture of despair as he sunk back into his seat.

"Been here? What do you mean?"

"Why, Uncle Gabe," exclaimed Hinton, "do you think that the man who murdered your boy—"

"That's enough, Harry. His name is Strahan. That settles it."

"It settles nothing. Strahan is not an uncommon name. There are many Strahans in the country."

"It accounts for everything, my boy. I understand it all now."

When Silver Sam was made acquainted with Eugene Cabanet and heard his story, his opinion tallied with that of Old Gabe.

"I have been suspecting something of that kind," said he. "But my notion was a vague and misty one, because such a fact was too horrible to take hold of. The story that Mr. Cabanet has told agrees with the facts I ferreted out after the murder of the Wilburns on Plumas Creek. That woman had run away from her husband, who was an Englishman named Strahan, and who owned a stock-farm in Nebraska. I don't see how the fact could well be made plainer."

But Henry Hinton was not entirely satisfied. Having had a strictly scientific education, he usually insisted upon the attainment of absolute certainty.

He had thought of a further test, which he applied the ensuing evening, at the new house, where Eugene Cabanet and Silver Sam were welcome guests.

"Has Kate seen that locket?" he asked Mollie.

"I suppose so. She must have seen it often."

"The picture, I mean. Has she ever seen that?"

"Not that I know of. I am not in the habit of showing it."

"Bring her in here. I wish her to see the picture."

Alice Strahan still insisted on being called Crazy Kate, and was usually known by that name, though her condition had improved until there was seldom visible any disturbance of her mental faculties.

Hinton opened the locket, showed her the picture, and asked her if she recognized the face.

A look of distress came into her scarred and withered countenance, and the restlessness of her eyes returned as she gazed intently at the picture.

"I know it," she said, at last. "It is his mother."

"Bob Strahan's mother?" inquired Hinton.

"The man who killed me—his mother."

"You have seen her, then?"

"No—I never saw her; but he had a picture of her. It was not this face, but more like it than I am like Alice Marden that used to be. Yes; it is his mother, as she was once."

This settled the question, and Hinton reported the identification of the picture to Gabe Cryder's guests.

"We are all satisfied now," said Sam Slevin, "and everything is clear, as I take it. I was sure that the face in the locket recalled something to me, and now I know what it was. It was the face of the murdered woman at Plumas

Creek. The solemn fact is, Uncle Gabe, that your first wife's son is one of the worst villains unhung."

"It was not his fault," protested the old man—"not all his fault."

"Perhaps not. It was largely the fault of his mother, as well as of circumstances. She has paid for her crimes, and he was the instrument, though I hope that he did not kill her in cold blood. When he murdered your boy, in the log-house over there, it is plain that his motive was robbery. But he did not know who his victim was until he saw the face in the locket. Who would have his mother's picture but his mother's son?"

"But young Gabe was not her son," suggested Hinton.

"The other one must have believed him to be. When he saw his mother's face in that locket, he left it on the breast of the boy he had killed, and ran away. So that question is answered."

"At last," assented Hinton.

"When he learned that Miss Mollie and Uncle Gabe were the dead boy's sister and father, even he could do no more murder in that family. As he said, he had to draw the line somewhere. His mother and his brother were enough. That man, Mr. Cryder, was born to be hanged. You will not help to hang him, and no more will I, since the business has come to this pass; but he will be hanged, and you may as well make up your mind to that."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE GHOST AGAIN.

AFTER the discovery of the identity of Bob Strahan, Old Gabe sunk into a condition of sadness and depression from which nothing could rouse him.

He had experienced trouble enough in his life, and in his old age it was the culmination of his calamities to know that his second son had been murdered by his first-born.

His only consolation was found in the belief that the murderer had not known of his relationship to the victim until after the deed was done, and to that belief he clung tenaciously.

But it was bad enough to know that his eldest born was a murderer—many times a murderer—guilty of crimes unnumbered—an outlaw whose hand was against every man, and whom every man was licensed to kill on sight.

And there was no hope for it—no possibility of pardon or reform—nothing but the gallows or some other violent death at the end of his son's life.

The old man was so distressed by these reflections, that they gave a gloomy tinge to everything, and he went moping about, as if he had lost all his snap and vigor.

He often said to his young partner that life was worthless to him, as he had nothing to live for.

"You have Mollie," protested Hinton, "and if she is not worth living for, I don't know what is. You will soon have me, I hope, and I don't believe that I will be a bad substitute for a son."

"That is so, Harry. I couldn't ask for a better lad than you are, and Mollie is as good as gold. But you can't undo what has been done, or take away the disgrace that hangs upon me."

"Look at it in another way, Uncle Gabe. You are just beginning life again, just beginning to make a fortune out of the mine."

"Confound the mine! I wish we had never seen it, Harry. I wish we had never come here. There's somethin' about this place that is killin' me, and I ought to get away from it. There is a curse on Cranch's Gulch, a curse on Dead Man's Tree, a curse on the mine. I want to give it all up."

But that was not the way the young man felt about it.

As he said, they were just beginning to make a fortune in the mine, and there was every reason to believe that the fortune would be a big one.

For the sake of all concerned, and especially for the sake of Mollie, he was not going to give that up.

Therefore he humored the old man as well as he could, and tried to keep up his spirits, hoping that his gloomy mood would pass away.

There was another who would not have been willing to leave Cranch's Gulch or to give up the mine.

That was Crazy Kate—or Alice, as her friends had begun to call her, hoping to get her accustomed to the name.

She was the third partner in the mine, and fully appreciated her position as a capitalist.

Money was coming in pretty freely, and she was not only consulted about its expenditure in the business, but was receiving her share of the surplus income, of which she was vastly proud.

She not only improved her personal appearance until she became quite presentable, but delighted in spending her money on Mollie, and also delighted in receiving and counting it.

It was not to be supposed that she would willingly forego those pleasures.

But she had her own ideas and her own fears as regarded the future performances of her outlaw husband.

"He will come back here, my dear," she privately informed Mollie. "Folks may say what they please, and worry as much as they want to; but that is one thing certain. He will hear that I am getting rich, and will come after my money. Oh, he will be sure to come."

Mollie could only hope that he would not, as she had seen quite enough of him.

About this time the neighborhood of Cranch's Gulch was agitated anew by reports concerning the haunted house.

The ghost had begun to walk again.

A man who had occasion to pass that way late at night saw it, and it frightened him so badly that his boots were too heavy for him.

But he was undeniably drunk at the time, and his story was not fully credited.

Shortly afterward it was seen by another man, whose sobriety was unquestioned.

Though he professed not to have been frightened by it, he admitted that he made no attempt to investigate or pursue it, but immediately made himself quite scarce in that locality.

As he delicately stated the case, he was not afraid of ghosts, because he did not believe in them; but he did not care to be worried by things that he could not understand.

These two persons—the unreliable and the reliable witness—both described the ghost exactly as it had been described on previous occasions.

It moved as if in the air, apparently without touching the ground, and it was robed in white, and on its breast were splotches of blood.

It made itself visible either as if rising from the grave of Gabe Cryder's son, or as if issuing from the house in which he had been murdered.

Crazy Kate caught sight of it one night, and it gave her such a shock that she kept her bed all the next day.

She had her own opinion concerning the matter, which she privately revealed to Mollie.

"It means," she said, "that he is coming back here. That is what I have believed, and now I am sure of it. The ghost is sure to bring him, as it did before. I must hide my money."

The fact has been mentioned that Henry Hinton did not believe in ghosts.

All the evidence that had been adduced failed to convince him of the reality of this particular ghost.

He believed that it was either a series of optical illusions, or a concerted scheme to deceive the public.

There were no ghosts in science.

If ghosts really existed, he would be glad to see one, to interview it, to investigate it.

Until he could have personal and visible evidence of such an apparition, he would refuse to believe in it.

Therefore he determined to devote a few of his nights to the task of discovering and catching the ghost.

His first experiment was a pleasant, but unsuccessful one.

Perhaps it was the pleasantness of it that tended to make it unsuccessful.

He easily persuaded Mollie Cryder to sit up with him and watch for the ghost, and for this purpose they seated themselves comfortably in a secluded spot, where they could have a good view of the locality frequented by the ghost.

Mollie was naturally excited and nervous, but was not really afraid while she had her hero to guard her.

There was no occasion to fear, as they saw no ghost.

They had many matters to talk about, and the night was so warm and pleasant that their midnight seance was quite enjoyable.

It was possible that while they were occupied with other matters the ghost might have appeared and disappeared.

Certain it is that they saw no ghost, and they went home at last, well pleased with each other, and one of them satisfied with the lack of adventure.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

CATCHING THE GHOST.

HENRY HINTON was forced to the conclusion that ghost-hunting was a serious business, which could not profitably be combined with love-making.

He was also of the opinion that ghosts could not be hunted in couples.

He therefore determined that his further prosecution of the business should be confined to his single self.

It was also an important portion of his programme that the ghost should be sought in its favorite haunts, and bearded, as it were, in its den.

Thus it came to pass that on this occasion he took no partner, and confided his design to no person.

He armed himself with a revolver, to be used in case the ghost should prove to be a mischief-maker and inclined to be vicious; but he was not provided with a pocket flask, the usual resource of ghost-hunters.

Whatever he might see, he was determined that his account should not be discredited by suspicions of an alcoholic aid to the imagination.

At an early hour of the night—early for ghosts—he left his snug quarters in Gabe Cry-

der's pleasant home, and went direct to the haunted house on the other side of the valley.

The night was dark and cloudy—no moon and no stars—a most eligible night for wandering ghosts.

His intention was to enter the haunted house and wait there for the spectral visitant, and he carried out this intention to the letter, though he was obliged to admit that the task was not a pleasant one.

There was no ghost in the house when he entered it—that much was certain.

All was dark and silent inside, but the presence of a specter would of course have been immediately visible.

The table was in its old position, with the scanty dishes on it, just as it had been left there ever since he had first entered the house with Gabe Cryder.

He shuddered as he stumbled against it, recalling so vividly the scene which he had witnessed shortly after the murder.

In the darkness he could almost see the dead boy and the blood-stains on the floor.

He seated himself on an old chair, with his back against the log wall, opposite to the door, which he had carefully closed as he found it.

It was a tiresome task, waiting there for his cheerless company, and he had plenty of time for consideration.

Of course, his reflections were mainly connected with the ghost, though now and then they took an excursion to the more pleasant subject of Mollie Cryder.

His reason led him, somewhat to his surprise, to doubt his previous conviction that the ghost scare was caused by some single mischief-maker or was a concerted scheme to annoy and mystify the public of Cranch's Gulch.

There was really no object to be gained by playing such a prank and keeping it up, and the greatest sufferer by the scheme must be the ghostly masquerader.

Besides, the mischief-maker was at any time liable to be shot down by some person who should happen not to have lost his nerve.

If it was not the work of some freakish Gulcher, what was it?

A real ghost, perhaps.

But that was impossible, and the young man tried to dismiss the subject from his mind, and to think of other things.

His rambling meditations were not a bit exciting, and his endeavors to fix his thoughts upon any one point only had a tendency to make him drowsy.

Gradually his mental powers failed him, and finally he sunk into a doze, seated in his chair.

He was awakened by a faint noise.

Just the faintest imaginable noise, possibly like the rustling of ghostly garments.

But it was sufficient to wake him thoroughly, and he opened his eyes and started.

There was something to stare at.

The door opened quietly, and the ghost entered.

It was exactly such a ghost as had been so often and so accurately described.

A form light and airy, robed in white, its breast covered with splotches of blood.

When he afterward told the story, the young man was forced to admit that at the moment he was unnerved by the spectral appearance.

A cold chill ran over him, and he was incapable of any exertion.

But he soon regained his self-control, and applied himself to a careful study and scientific investigation of the ghost, which was evidently unconscious of his presence.

Though the interior of the log-house was quite dark, he was favored by the dim light that came through the open door.

Thus he was enabled to make a discovery which both relieved and astonished him.

The ghost was a woman.

Of that there could be no doubt, as her long hair fell down upon her shoulders, though her face was but faintly visible.

Satisfied that he did not have to deal with the ghost of young Gabe Cryder, but with a living woman, Hinton contented himself with sitting there quietly and observing her movements.

She stooped down by the side of the table, and seemed to be feeling about on the floor.

Then she arose, took something from her neck, and laid it on the table.

Hinton fancied that it glittered, and that he heard a slight metallic ring.

She did not leave it there, but picked it up shortly, and hung it around her neck again.

Then she turned, and walked out of the house as quietly as she had entered it, closing the door behind her.

Hinton rose from his chair at once, and followed her as softly as possible.

But he was surprised, when he opened the door and looked after her, to see how far from the log house she had already got.

There was good reason for the statements of former ghost-seers concerning the peculiarity of her movements.

She really did seem to progress without touching the earth, and as if borne on the wings of the wind.

So swift was her flight, that Hinton, though

there was no danger of losing sight of her, was obliged to exert himself to keep within a reasonable distance of her.

Lightly she sped down the slope, and crossed the valley.

Her motion was slower as she mounted the other side, and the young man was easily able to follow her and observe her more closely.

Straight to Gabe Cryder's house she went, with the successful hunter of ghosts close at her heels.

She opened the front door, and walked in, closing it behind her.

Hinton was obliged to give her a few seconds to get out of the way, and then he softly followed her into the house.

He was just in time to see the door of Mollie Cryder's room shut from within.

He went to his own room, and laid down, satisfied that the ghost would not walk again that night.

When Mollie came out in the morning she was as bright and fresh as ever, and nobody could have guessed at her nocturnal adventure.

"Did you sleep well last night?" inquired Henry Hinton.

"Quite well, thank you," she pleasantly answered.

"Have any bad dreams?"

"Oh, I had strange dreams; but I often have those, and they are always the same."

"I think I can guess what they were."

"You can guess my dream? How can you?"

"I wish you would step with me to your room a moment, and I want you to come, Uncle Gabe."

They followed him, wondering what he meant and inclined to suspect some sort of a joke.

Mollie's night-robe lay on the bed, and he picked it up, and held it before them.

"I caught the ghost last night," he said. "This is the dress it wore."

Before they could do anything but stare at him he picked up a red tippet.

"This," he said, "is the blood that the people saw on the breast of the ghost. Do you understand?"

"I do not understand, for one," answered Mollie. "What does it mean, Harry?"

"It means, my dear, that you are a somnambulist—that you walk in your sleep, and do things that you know nothing about. Come to breakfast, and I will tell you the whole story."

He gave at his leisure the details of his lonely vigil and the final discovery and pursuit of the ghost.

"I can't tell you how thankful I am," said he, "that I was moved to watch for that ghost and follow it. If somebody else had undertaken the job, there might have been trouble. I think it will be well for us all to keep this little matter a secret between us, and to let the people wonder what has become of the ghost."

Mollie Cryder was not only astonished but greatly mortified by what she had been told, though she was naturally glad that the discovery had been made.

"That is a very bad piece of business, Harry," said the old man, as they went down to their work. "What shall we do about it?"

"It is my opinion, Uncle Gabe, that we ought to hurry up that marriage. In the mean time we had better make Alice sleep with her and take care of her."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TAKING A TARTAR.

THE old Cut-throat Kingdom—that is to say, the establishment which had been run by Sheeny Aaron before he removed to Cranch's Gulch—still existed in the neighborhood of Trailton, and was still favored by rascals and feared by honest men.

Perhaps the present proprietor was not as thoroughly villainous as the former one, and perhaps the frequenters of the place were not quite as scoundrelly as Bob Strahan and his gang; but both were bad enough.

Besides Pete Soames, who was then running the shebang, there happened to be but three of his lambs present, one bright summer day, when a man rode up, dismounted, and entered the bar-room.

He was a noticeable man, to look at, but not because of his beauty.

In fact, he was as ugly and villainous a specimen of human depravity as a respectable person would care to meet.

He was tall, but lean and gaunt, and his clothing was in rags, and his hair and beard were long and unkempt, and his face was even darker than nature intended it to be, and his entire appearance was wild and disreputably wretched.

There was another peculiarity about him, which could not fail to attract the notice of even a casual observer.

His large and dark eyes were very strange to look at.

Sometimes they stared blankly at vacancy; sometimes his gaze roved about restlessly; and again there was such a wild and fierce glare in those eyes as made men shrink or stand on their guard.

He was recognized as soon as he walked in; but there was that dangerous look in his eyes, and no person spoke to him.

He stepped up to the counter, took from a dirty rag a bar of silver, and laid it down in front of Pete Soames.

"Here's for the new and the old," he said. "Give me some sop."

A bottle and a glass were set before him, and he filled and emptied the glass three times, almost without stopping to breathe.

In the mean time Pete Soames was weighing the bar of silver and making an entry in his account-book.

Then the customer turned around and faced the others, his manner somewhat milder and more composed than when he came in.

"You don't seem to know me, boys," he remarked. "Come up and soak yourselves."

His invitation was accepted with the greatest eagerness and alacrity.

"We knowed you all straight enough, Bob Strahan," replied one of the three; "but we allowed that mebbe you wouldn't keer to know us jest now."

"Why shouldn't I care to know you?" thundered the outlaw, with a tone and a manner that made the other side off.

"Why not, I say? Am I the President of the United States, or the King of Colorado? Do I look it? I've known you a long time, and why shouldn't I know you now? Did you ever hear of my going back on old friends?"

"Twarn't that, Bob. Nobody never heerd tell o' your goin' back on anything. We allowed that mebbe you didn't want to be bothered. That's all."

"Take your drinks, then, and don't bother me, or you might get into trouble."

The ungraciousness of this invitation did not interfere with its acceptance.

Pete Soames, who had satisfied himself of the value of the silver and the present state of his rough customer's account, freely filled all orders that were given, and did not fail to count himself among those who had been invited.

The three loungers proceeded to "soak themselves" lavishly at Strahan's expense, but without obtruding upon him any expressions of opinion.

Indeed, they did not speak except when they were spoken to, and then their invariable reply was "some of the same."

The man who was "setting 'em up" poured down glass after glass of the poison supplied by Pete Soames, and it was evident to those who were acquainted with Bob Strahan that he was drinking himself into a condition which might cause mankind to beware of him.

But he spoke very few words, and it was evident that something was preying on his mind.

What it was became manifest when he turned savagely upon the man who had first spoken to him.

"What do you mean, you white-livered skunk," he demanded, "by saying that you allowed that I didn't care to know you just now? Is there anything the matter with me, just now, more than any other time?"

"Nothin' at all, Bob," answered the other, still anxious to conciliate the man who was buying liquor for the party.

"Not a bit of anythin'. I didn't mean no sort o' harm."

"What did you mean, then? You meant something. Spit it out, and get clear of it, or there'll be some sort of harm for somebody."

Still another attempt at conciliation was made, though the threatened man looked as if he, too, might mean mischief if he should be bullied much further.

"It ain't nothin' to speak of, Bob Strahan, as I told you. We ain't the sort as would be likely to give you away, and we kinder wondered at your comin' around, as you ain't showed up fur some time."

"Why shouldn't I come around? Why shouldn't I show up?"

"I don't really know why you shouldn't ef you want to, and ef you think it safe. There was rewards out, though I've heerd that they've been took back; but it is said men are lookin' fur you yet."

"So it was the rewards you were thinking of, was it? There are rewards out now, and big rewards, too. Perhaps you would like to earn them—you, or all of you. What man is looking for me, for one?"

"Silver Sam."

"I don't care a curse for him. I defy any man or set of men to take me."

"I take you, Bob Strahan!"

It was none of the three loungers who spoke, nor yet Pete Soames.

A man had quietly entered the room during the heated wrangle, unheard and unseen.

He was a sandy-haired man, with auburn beard, well known to the evil-doers of that region as Silver Sam.

It was a bold act, even for him, to tackle such a man as Bob Strahan, single-handed, and in such a den.

But Sam Slevin was a man who did not know the meaning of the word fear, and who was simply bent upon accomplishing his purpose, regardless of odds or consequences.

Many hairbreadth escapes from imminent peril had possibly made him over-confident, and it was his reckless courage that had cowed many scoundrels.

As he spoke, he laid his hand upon the shoulder of his man.

To the great surprise of all present, including Silver Sam himself, Bob Strahan turned quietly, and looked calmly into the muzzle of a revolver that was pointed at his head by his would-be captor.

The heat of his anger seemed to have vanished, and there was no dangerous look on his face, and he was apparently as cool as an icicle.

"What do you want me for?" he mildly inquired.

"For the murder on Plumas Creek," replied Silver Sam.

"Plumas Creek? I don't know the place. What murder do you mean?"

"The murder of your mother."

Was it a cyclone that struck Cut-throat Kingdom at that instant?

None of the men who were present could have described what happened just then.

There was the report of a pistol; but the shot was fired at nobody, and it hurt nobody.

With a roar like the bellow of a mad bull, Bob Strahan seized his antagonist, regardless of his ready weapon, lifted him from the floor, and shook him as a dog would shake a rat.

When Sam Slevin started to take Strahan, he might have reasonably apprehended armed interference on the part of the outlaw's companions, and that probability made his attempt the more daring.

But it was speedily and painfully made apparent to him that no such aid was required by the Tartar he had caught.

He did his best to struggle, but for the moment was as powerless as a child in the grasp of a giant.

Bob Strahan, in fact, was a maniac, driven mad by the mention of his mother's murder, and just then he possessed a maniac's strength, compared with which his normal powers were as nothing.

"You ain't one of them!" he yelled. "You don't belong to the family. You've fooled with me once too often, curse you!"

He lifted his struggling burden yet higher, and fairly flung Slevin half the length of the room and against the log wall at the end, where he fell in a heap on the floor.

With a wild cry the outlaw ran out of the house, jumped on his horse, and dashed away at headlong speed.

Silver Sam was not seriously injured, his frantic foe having exhausted his strength in that last effort.

He was momentarily stunned, but quickly recovered.

He picked himself up, felt of his limbs, and looked about in a dazed way, as if to inquire whether the lightning had struck anybody else.

His quick ears caught the noise of the galloping of a horse, and instantly he was all action.

He rushed out, mounted his horse, and rode rapidly in the direction of the retreating footsteps.

Pete Soames and the three loungers stood and stared, and it was not until the leading actors had vanished that they could recover themselves sufficiently to express an opinion concerning the scene.

Silver Sam was not in sight of the fugitives at the start, but headed his horse for the sound, and then followed the trail.

It was easy to follow, as Strahan's horse, driven frantic by his frantic rider, had torn up the soft earth of the forest in his headlong course.

After nearly an hour's hard riding, which took him into the heart of the hills, Slevin came in view of his quarry, and spurred forward to get within hail and rifle reach.

Not that he wanted to kill the outlaw; but he was determined to capture him, to wipe out the defeat at Cut-throat Kingdom, if for no other reason.

As he mounted the crest of a rise he saw Strahan a little way beyond him, in the valley below, and near a rocky and formidable ridge that looked as if nature had put as much distortion as possible into a little bit of the earth's surface.

The pursuer immediately hailed the fugitive, and ordered him to stop, on the peril of his life.

Strahan only put spurs to his horse, which bounded toward the ridge.

Silver Sam raised his rifle, and fired, not at the man, but at the horse.

The bullet was true to its errand, and the poor beast fell, floundering and kicking.

But his rider was safely off before the horse touched the ground, and the next moment was lost in the intricacies of the rocky ridge.

The pursuer pressed forward, but at once perceived the impossibility of following the fugitive on horseback.

He must either abandon the undertaking, or leave his horse and continue the chase on foot, and that would be hardly worth while, as night was coming on.

So he sadly gave up the pursuit, and turned his horse's head toward the road that led to Cranch's Gulch.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE ROAD TO DEATH.

BOB STRAHAN was armed when he was overtaken by his pursuer; but he made no attempt to defend himself.

If he had stopped to fight, he would have found himself at a disadvantage, as Silver Sam's repeating-rifle was bearing on him.

But it is probable that he gave no thought to the chances of such an encounter.

Weakened by his sudden and amazing exhibition of energy, and by the frantic ride that followed it, his passion had cooled, and his nerves were unstrung.

His mind was not entirely shattered, though his eyes were wild and restless, and his actions were guided by instinct, rather than by reason.

He took the easiest and surest way to escape from his pursuer when he plunged into the intricacies of the rocky fastness before him.

Instantly he put a pile of rock between himself and Slevin, and then climbed the height with the agility of a goat, always under cover and out of sight, until he reached a break in the ridge which was comparatively easy to travel.

He had not left any trail to speak of as he climbed the height, and he did not leave any thereafter, except one that would require so much time and patience to follow it as would render pursuit unprofitable.

As if by instinct he passed over a rough and rocky tract, where it would be almost impossible to leave footprints.

At the same time he changed his course frequently, taking the most difficult and intricate routes that presented themselves, so that his foe, if he should continue the pursuit, could only come across him by an unimaginable accident.

Finally he emerged from the hills and the broken ground about them, coming out in a plain covered with heavy timber.

He must have then supposed, if he really gave the subject any thought, that he was safe from Sam Slevin's pursuit.

It may have been that he was weary, as his travel since his horse was shot had been rapid and difficult, and he looked haggard and exhausted.

Certain it is that he moderated his gait and sauntered along at his leisure, but not without looking about furtively as he went, with the wild and restless air of a hunted man.

As darkness came on he struck a broad and plain trail, though not a fresh one, and followed it.

It led in the direction of Cranch's Gulch; but there was nothing to show that he knew or cared whither he was going.

The moon, then in its third quarter, came out after a while, and shone brightly in a sky that was only occasionally obscured by fleecy clouds.

Suddenly he started, stopped, and shrunk back.

But the weird and ghastly object that had arrested his attention had such a horrible fascination for him that he could not help standing there and staring at it.

It hung from the limb of a tree close to the trail, dangling at the end of a rope, silent, helpless, inert, but most evidently a human form.

Its hands were tied behind its back, and its feet were tied together, and birds of prey had been feeding on the exposed hands and face.

As Bob Strahan stood and stared at the horrible object, it slowly swung around and faced him.

At the same moment the moon came out from behind a cloud by which it had been partially veiled, and its light fell full upon the object.

In spite of disfigurement, the outlaw recognized it at once as the lifeless body of Sheeny Aaron.

He clapped his hands over his eyes to shut out the ghastly sight, and his yell of horror startled the forest as he rushed away.

On he went, as fast as his weakened limbs could carry him, never casting a glance behind him, running as if the furies were lashing him forward.

Instinctively he kept to the trail, and followed it until it led him into a narrow pass between two hills.

Without his knowledge he was pursuing the route taken by Silver Sam and his party when they hurried after the band of marauders to Cranch's Gulch.

He partially recovered his composure when he entered the pass, and looked around as if to make sure that the horrible object had not pursued him.

But he saw nothing to trouble him, and he sneaked through the pass like a wounded beast that has nearly exhausted its power of flight.

Beyond the pass he struck the forest again, and there he walked more slowly and raised his head once more.

Worse trouble was in store for him there.

As he walked along, dragging his weary limbs as if they pained him, he stumbled over something that lay across the trail.

It was not a log, but something softer, though

quite as dead, and the feel of it sent a chill through his frame.

He rose and looked at it, and the sight confirmed his fears.

It was the corpse of a man, and it had been mutilated by the beasts of prey, as well as by the birds.

He turned from it suddenly, and hanging by a rope from a tree, as Sheeny Aaron had hung, was another human body.

Away he rushed; but his staring eyes did their work too well, and whichever way he turned he saw corpses on the ground or hanging from the trees.

He had reached the spot where Silver Sam and his party had the fight with the raiders returning from the Gulch.

They had not buried one of the slain robbers, but had left on the ground the bodies of all but such as they had hung to the trees as a solemn warning to scoundrels in general.

There were not many of them; but to the excited imagination of the fugitive outlaw the woods were full of them.

He could not step without tumbling over corpses, and every tree bore that horrible fruit.

Again he rushed away with his hands to his eyes, and again the woods rung with his yells.

Still he stuck to the trail, which was yet broader and plainer beyond the spot where the fight occurred, as it had been made by parties returning from or going to the Gulch.

Either he kept it by instinct, or fate was drawing him once more to Cranch's Gulch.

He ran until his exhausted limbs refused to carry him any further.

Stumbling over a log, he fell on the ground, and lay there unconscious.

His swoon did not last long; in fact, it may have been mere exhaustion that caused him to lose his remaining senses.

He rose and looked about in a dazed and bewildered manner, pressing his head with his hands.

Then he walked away, slowly and uncertainly, dragging one foot after another with difficulty.

It was his easiest and most natural course to keep the trail; but he might have known, if he thought about the matter at all, that it was sure to bring him into some settlement where he had better not be.

It brought him to the valley that led into Cranch's Gulch.

When he found himself within the valley he looked about frequently, with more intelligence in his wandering eyes than previously, as if he recognized the locality.

But his recognition, such as it was, did not prevent him from entering the road and walking down toward the Gulch.

The old cabins that he passed, an inheritance of the present inhabitants from former Gulchers, were silent and wrapped in gloom, no light showing anywhere.

It was then nearly two hours past midnight, and near time for the moon to set.

The western side of the valley was shrouded in darkness; but the eastern side was partly lighted by moonbeams that filtered through the trees that fringed the mountains and gave ghostly lights and shadows.

Especially did the parting light touch the haunted log-house, as if it loved to linger there.

Bob Strahan turned aside from the road as if involuntarily, drawn by an attraction he could not resist, and ascended the slope slowly, his feeble steps taking the direction of the cabin in which he had murdered his half-brother.

The moonlight had vanished by that time; but something came in its place.

It seemed that there was to be no end for him to the horrors and tortures of that night.

Suddenly there rose before him, as if from the grave of the dead boy, a form robed in white, with spots of blood on its breast.

He sunk upon the ground, his entire frame shaking and quivering with terror or some deeper emotion.

There he remained, powerless to speak or stir, while the ghost of Cranch's Gulch went through its usual nocturnal performances.

From the grave it glided through the air, as the ghost-seers had described its movement, without appearing to touch the ground, until it reached the cabin.

It opened the door and entered, remaining there a brief period of time.

The period was not long enough to enable Strahan to regain any strength of mind or nerve.

Before he could think of rising, the ghost emerged from the house and glided away.

He closed his eyes, and when he looked up again the sheeted form had vanished.

After a little while he slowly arose, and feebly and irresolutely approached the house.

The door was open then, as if inviting him to enter, and he did enter, straightening himself up, and walking in with a firm tread.

He had not closed the door, and there was light enough to enable him dimly to see the interior.

All was as he had left it when he fled from the scene of murder, except that there was no dead youth lying on the floor, staining the planks with freshly-shed blood.

But the eye of the murderer's mind may have seen that.

"He has been here," muttered the outlaw, hoarsely whispering. "Has he left me any message—any token?"

His glance fell on something that glittered on the table, and he picked it up.

It was a gold locket.

With shaking fingers he struck a match that he took from his pocket, opened the case, and saw a picture inside.

"That settles it," he muttered, and replaced the locket on the table.

Then his glance rested on a piece of rope that lay near the door.

"Everything is ready," he said, and picked up the rope.

Defly, as if accustomed to that sort of thing, he knotted a noose in one end of the rope.

Then he mounted the table, and firmly attached the other end of the rope to a cross-beam, carefully measuring with his eye the distance below.

He took a folded paper from his pocket, passed the chain of the locket through the paper, and put the chain around his neck, placing the paper so that it would lie on his breast with the locket against the paper.

All his movements and operations were methodical, careful and exact, though his lips quivered, and his limbs trembled from weakness.

He moved the table a little aside, set a chair under the rope, just where the dead boy had lain, mounted the chair, put the noose around his neck, and drew the knot close under his left ear.

Then he kicked the chair from under him.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE SUICIDE'S CONFESSION.

AFTER the discovery of her nocturnal wanderings, precautions were taken to prevent Mollie Cryder from playing any more ghostly pranks.

She was so thoroughly frightened by what she had learned concerning herself, as well as so deeply mortified, that she was glad to consent to anything that promised to put a stop to the perils and improprieties of sleep-walking.

No harsh measures were taken, however, as none were deemed necessary.

Crazy Kate, who had gradually grown out of her Jintown name and become known as Alice Marden, was settled as Mollie Cryder's roommate, the two occupying the same bed, and that was thought to be a sufficient safeguard.

It proved to be such for several nights, and during that period there were no fresh ghost stories afloat at Cranch's Gulch.

That this measure was not quite strong enough was soon made painfully apparent.

There was an alarm at night that aroused the Cryder household.

Alice awoke, and found Mollie missing from her side.

A few seconds served to convince her that the girl was not in the room, and she made the house resound with her cries.

The mountain veteran and Henry Hinton threw on their clothes, and hastened to inquire the cause of the alarm.

They were troubled when it was explained to them, but saw no cause for fright.

"She has slipped out and gone sleep-walking again," said Hinton. "She will soon wander back home, and in the mean time I will watch her and see that no harm comes to her."

He drew on his boots, and sallied forth; but from the front door he saw a white figure gliding across the valley and ascending the slope toward the house.

"She is safe," he said. "There she is coming home. Go back to bed, Alice. Don't wake her when she comes in, and say nothing to her about it in the morning."

Mollie arrived safely, and was watched until she re-entered room.

Her father and Henry Hinton stood almost in front of her when she came in; but it was evident that she did not see them, as her eyes had the fixed look of unconsciousness peculiar to sleep-walkers.

They decided that thereafter she should be locked in her room every night.

It was Henry Hinton who took it upon himself to speak to her about her adventure in the morning.

"Did you sleep well last night, Mollie?" he inquired.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, suddenly turning pale. "Is it possible that I was out again?"

"It is a fact that you were out again, and we are thankful that you got back safe. You slipped away from Alice in the night, and went across the valley; but we saw you when you came home."

Mollie was greatly troubled, and was scarcely consoled by the assurance that she should be more carefully guarded thereafter.

"I had the same old dream," she said, "though there may have been a little change in it this time. I dreamed that I went over yonder, and looked at my brother's grave. Then

I walked into the cabin, and left my locket on the table there."

She raised her hand to her breast for the locket; but it was missing.

"The locket is gone!" she cried.

"Perhaps you did leave it there," observed Hinton, "unless it is in your room."

Her room was carefully searched; but the locket was not found.

"You surely must have left it in the cabin as you dreamed you did," said the young man. "I will step over there and get it before I go to work."

Old Gabe proposed to accompany his partner, and the two crossed the valley to the haunted house.

The door was open, disclosing to them as they approached it an unexpected and terrible sight.

A man was hanging by a rope from a cross-beam, his feet nearly touching the floor, and there could be no doubt that he was dead.

As neither his hands nor his feet were tied, it was a clear case of suicide.

"It is Bob Strahan!" exclaimed Hinton.

The old man had already discovered that fact, and he dropped upon the rude bedstead where his boy had formerly slept, and covered his face with his hands.

Hinton quickly perceived the locket which he was seeking.

It was on the suicide's breast, and under it was a folded paper.

He got up on a chair, and tried to remove the locket, but could not do so without severing the chain, as he had nothing with which to clip it.

Sam Slevin, who had reached the Gulch early in the morning, had gone to the office of Cryder & Co. to report his encounter with Bob Strahan at Cut-throat Kingdom.

Not finding either of the partners there, he had gone up the valley to meet them, and had seen them crossing over to the haunted house.

He followed them thither, arriving when Hinton, having completed his examination of the corpse, was debating what should be done toward getting it down.

The situation was briefly explained to the newcomer, and Old Gabe was aroused from the dazed condition into which he had been plunged by astonishment, rather than by grief.

The three men lowered the body to the floor, and laid it where the murderer's young victim had been found sometime before.

After the rope had been removed from the neck, Hinton took off the locket, and drew from the paper the chain that had fastened it there.

The young man opened the paper, which was foolscap, closely written on with a pencil in a tremulous but evidently educated hand.

He read to his companions this brief account of the suicide's life, containing a confession of his crimes and a statement of the causes that had led him to commit self-slaughter.

"My name is Robert Strahan, or I have always believed it to be my name until lately. I will not mention the name I ought to have borne, as I shall never claim it, and nobody will care to give it to me."

"My supposed father was an Englishman named Strahan, who lived in Nebraska, and was supposed to be rich. My mother lived with him there until I was grown, and for several years they were not on good terms with each other. The fault, as I have no reason to doubt, was my mother's."

"At last she disappeared, and it was said that she had run away with a farm hand named Wilburn, who had been a great favorite of hers."

"Mr. Strahan then sold his place, settled up all his business, and informed me that he was going to England. I asked him what I should do, and he told me to go to the devil."

"I went there, and was in a hurry about it. First, it was gambling, and that led to robbery, and robbery led to murder. For awhile I put on plenty of style, and cut quite a dash."

"It was about then that I married Alice Marden, whom I afterward tried to kill. That was because she proved to be poor when I had supposed her to be rich, and because she was a nuisance and a burden to me."

"I had sworn to kill the man who ran off with my mother—I was virtuous enough for that, anyhow—and I learned that they were living together on Plumas Creek. I went there, picked a quarrel with him, and killed him. My mother took his part, and fought for him so hard that I had to kill her, too. It was her life or mine, and I don't regret it."

"After that I couldn't go to the devil fast enough to suit me. But Silver Sam was on my track, and I had a hard time dodging about and hiding."

"Once I brought up at Cranch's Gulch, worn out, without a dollar, and hungry as a wolf."

"I found a young man stopping in one of the old cabins, who invited me to feed with him and stay all night. I did so, and paid him for his kindness by killing him the next morning."

"He told me that after a long run of hard luck he had got a little pile, and was going home to his father. I determined to have that little pile, and killed him while he was getting breakfast for me."

"After I had got his money I noticed a locket hanging from his neck, and was taking it off when the case flew open, and I saw my mother's picture there, just as she had looked years before I killed her."

"I don't know just what I thought then. Perhaps I took the young fellow to be a brother of mine of whom I had never heard. Anyhow, the sight drove me wild, and I dropped the locket and ran away."

"Afterward I got hold of the rights of it, and knew that I had murdered my own half-brother."

"Ever since that murder has haunted me. I

could not sleep for dreaming of it, and when I was awake it gripped me like a nightmare. I have done my best and worst to shake it off; but it follows me everywhere, and is eating my life out.

"There is only one thing left for me to do. If that terror does not quit me—and I suppose it will hang on and get worse—I shall go to the house where I murdered my brother, and that will be the last of me. Then the devil will get his own."

"When I do that, if I do it, this paper will tell why I did it."

There was no signature.

Hinton folded the paper when he had finished reading it, and handed it to Old Gabe.

CHAPTER XL. "THE TRUE VEIN."

"It all turns out to have been pretty much as we had sized it up," remarked Silver Sam. "He must have got it into his head the last time he met them that Miss Mollie was his sister, and that Uncle Gabe was his father; but I don't know how he became sure of it. No wonder that he drew the line there. He had had enough of murdering his own family. Well, he is out of the way now, thank God!"

"He was my son," murmured Gabe Cryder.

"Yes, and if he had not been driven to the devil, perhaps he might have turned out to be a decent man. It was his mother's fault that he didn't, as I take it."

"She has paid for her wrong-doing, Sam."

"I suppose she has, as far as her death would go, and he has paid for his, as far as he could. I suppose he must have had this thing in his mind for quite awhile, and that he was out of his senses when he came here and found the locket on the table. That did the business for him."

Henry Hinton hastened to carry the news to the woman on the other side of the valley, and they were both considerably disturbed by it.

Alice had not expected anything of that kind, she said; but she had been sure that Strahan would return to Cranch's Gulch sooner or later, and she was glad that he had not harmed anybody but himself.

She then shut herself up in her room for a while, and there was reason to believe that she indulged in a quiet cry.

If so, it must have relieved her mind, as she was thereafter more cheerful than previously, and her mental faculties were decidedly clearer and better balanced.

The news was a shock to Mollie Cryder, as she was then assured that the suicide was really her half-brother, a fact which his evil courses could not entirely obscure.

She did not forget, too, his strange but merciful conduct when he captured her, and gave him credit for a small amount of human feeling.

The locket which Hinton brought back had become an object of horror to her.

It contained the face of the woman whose detestable conduct had caused all the afflictions of her father and his family, and who had deserved the violent death she met.

It was also a terrible thought that the locket had been found hanging from the neck of the suicide, and Mollie could not rid herself of the belief that her sleep-walking act of leaving it on the table in the haunted house had tended to draw him on to his death.

Therefore it was that she shuddered when the locket was brought back to her, and declared to Hinton that she wished never to see it or hear of it again.

As Alice was similarly affected toward that fatal token, and Gabe Cryder held it in utter abhorrence, the young man was puzzled to know how to dispose of it.

Finally he took it to the smelting works, threw it into the hottest furnace there, and endeavored to forget it.

When the news of Bob Strahan's strange death was brought to Cranch's Gulch it created great excitement there.

As the strangest part of his story was not told to the Gulchers, but was kept a close secret by those whom it most nearly interested, they missed the more exciting and romantic part of the affair.

But it was a great satisfaction to them to know that there was at last an end of the daring and skillful marauder who had given the Gulch such a hard time.

Their only grief arose from the fact that he had hanged himself, instead of giving them a chance of hanging him.

But they had the consolation of holding an inquest upon his body, and they did their best to make a feature of the inquest.

Whisky flowed more freely than ever before during the *renaissance* of Cranch's Gulch, and prominent citizens fought for the privilege of being numbered among the jury.

Then they were sorrowful because they could bring in no more sensational verdict than the simple statement that the deceased had "served himself right," and the lack of a genius who could suggest something better was deeply deplored.

The suicide was safely put under the ground, to the great satisfaction of all who knew anything about him, and that episode was placed among the archives of Cranch's Gulch.

A superstitious person would have regarded the casting of the fatal locket into the smelting furnace as a most suspicious omen.

It is absolutely certain that from that moment an era of prosperity dawned upon the Cranch's Gulch silver mine.

Scarcely had Henry Hinton cremated that locket when he received the joyful news of a fresh "find."

As the old miners said, they had struck the "true vein," and the success of the enterprise was assured.

Gabe brightened up perceptibly after the receipt of this news.

His young partner, who was well acquainted with the workings of the old man's mind, was of the opinion that the end of his trouble concerning his outlaw son had greatly relieved him.

Though the end was a bad one, it was not as bad as it might have been, and was greatly preferable to continued suspense.

The old man took a fresh interest in all the affairs of life, and readily gave his consent to the speedy marriage of Henry Hinton and his daughter.

When they were made one, Henry took the contract, and faithfully executed it, of preventing any further sleep-walking on the part of Mollie.

The silver mine was prosperous, making its owners wealthy, and Crazy Kate, who was thereafter known as Alice Marden, had several offers of marriage, which she resolutely refused.

Her share of the family prosperity, as she assured her friends, was to go to Mollie's children.

Old Gabe bought the property on which the haunted house stood, completely cleared away that obnoxious tenement, and built a high fence about the purchase, which included the grave of his younger son.

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